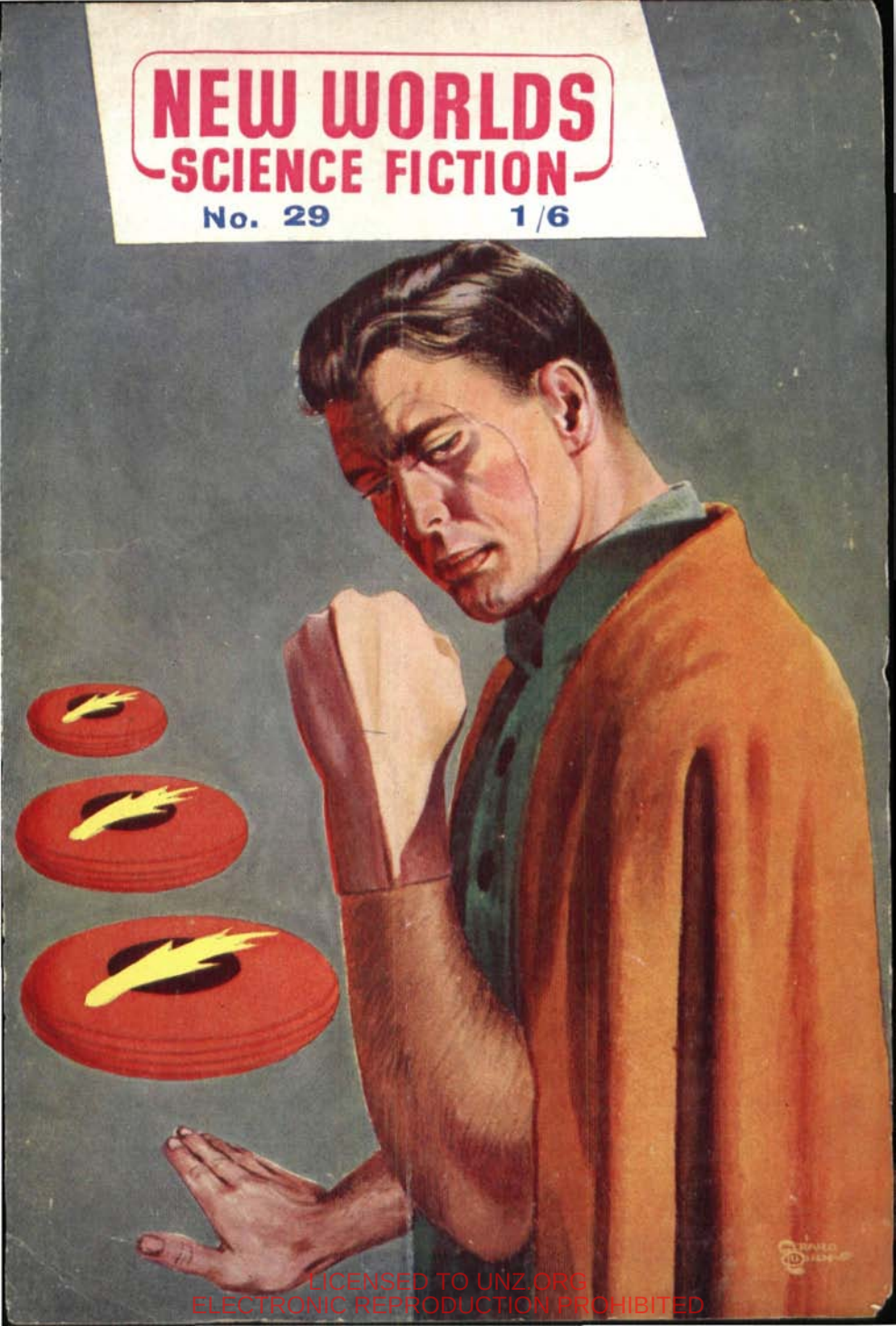
NEW WORLDS
SCIENCE FICTION

No. 29 1/6



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NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Alfred Bester

New York, U.S.A.

Born in Washington Heights, a neighbourhood of upper Manhattan, 41 years ago, and raised on Manhattan Island, Mr. Bester was educated in New York public schools, obtaining his bachelor's degree in science and fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania. He has been a professional writer for some fifteen years, having commenced in the pulp magazine field and then graduating to scenarios for comic books and syndicated comic strips. From there to radio scripts and directing, and finally T.V. Currently he is in England with his charming actress wife to write commercial American T.V. scripts and complete his second science fiction novel.

He states: "Science fiction has always been a relaxation and a holiday for me. I write it entirely for pleasure. Many fans have been extravagantly kind to my one science fiction novel, *The Demolished Man*, but in all fairness I must point out that I deserve no praise. It is no great feat for an author to write an enjoyable book when he is doing it to entertain himself and has all the time in the world for the job. It is the professional author, hard pressed for time and money, turning out story after story, who deserves praise for creating something fine in the face of such odds."

He would like to become as magnificent a writer as Galsworthy, to be elected first President of the world, and to make some sort of scientific discovery so that in future years people would talk about 'The Bester Effect,' or 'Bester's Syndrome,' or 'Bester's Law.' "In all this dreaming," he says, "I feel at one with all of you. Can any of you deny it?"

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NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 10

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Cover painting symbolising " The Messengers "

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Battleground

I have just been reading a most illuminating article entitled " Alas, What Boom?" by William L. Hamling, editor of the American fantasy magazine *Imagination*, recently published in the 200th Anniversary issue of the New York *Fantasy Times* (a science fiction news magazine). In it, Mr. Hamling diagnoses the many reasons behind the almost frightening slump in the American science fiction market—although he has only taken the magazine field, because of his own primary interest, his remarks are just as apt if applied to the entire U.S. book and pocketbook fields. There can be little doubt that science fiction in America as a reading medium is now at its lowest ebb since the American entry into World War II cut short an expected boom in the early 1940's.

Bill Hamling, at one time on the staff of the Ziff-Davis magazine *Amazing Stories*, points out that " in 1952 most titles on the stands were enjoying comfortable sales; in addition the movies continued to feature 'A' productions, and various large slick (magazines) ran science fiction articles and stories. To any but hard-core science fiction businessmen this meant a suddenly expanding publishing horizon—and so the blitz of 1953 came into existence." In that year there were over thirty titles on sale with varying publishing frequencies. Most publishers hoped to sell about 100,000 copies of each issue. "Certainly," Mr. Hamling states, " they all anticipated selling at least 60% of their distribution; and for most of them financial break-even hit close to the 60% mark. Most of them were lucky to sell half that figure."

At the height of the publishing spate, Mr. Hamling points out, there was a general trade recession (not confined solely to the science fiction market), which was due to many factors not the least being television. By the beginning of 1953 the boom had burst wide open.

Confirming reports I had received from other American sources, he goes on to describe the predicament of the news-stand and drug-store dealer faced with ever increasing daily deliveries of more and more reading material and no available space to display them. After being on show for a few days magazines would be replaced by new stock arrivals, and so on, while piles of magazines remained behind the scenes waiting to be asked for—or returned to the wholesalers.

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The pendulum eventually returned to its full swing when retailers started sending deliveries back unopened to the wholesalers. They in their turn started returning in bulk to the publishers and cutting their orders. As Mr. Hamling states, " Science fiction publishing became the most expensive paper conversion programme on record. Publishers discovered they were spending thousands to get a " fast buck " from the local junk dealer."

This so-called " recession " in the science fiction field, however, is not confined solely to the United States. It is, in fact, on a world-wide scale. In Britain the magazine market has being showing signs of recession all this year—despite optimistic blurbs from contemporary publishers, more in hope than anticipation. Quite recently the British reprint editions of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Beyond* and *Weird Tales* " temporarily " ceased publication. There are indications that some of the other reprints are not doing as well as they would like. A varying number of " one-shot " publishers have withdrawn from the market, if only as a temporary measure. Sales of existing British magazines (both reprint and original), are all mostly lower than last year's figures, mainly through over-production of too much trash by too many publishers hoping to make the British equivalent of the American " fast buck."

Just as in America, there is only a limited British market for this type of material. Readers are virtually " born " not " made "—absorbing some type of science fiction during their formative years and growing into adult reading over a generation.

There is every indication also that the hard-cover publishers in Britain are in for just as bad a time during the forthcoming winter period—as the Autumn spate of production goes into its stride there is increasing sales resistance by booksellers and librarians, bewildered by the many titles offered by so many publishers and with no yard-stick with which to guage the good, bad and indifferent titles. Regular readers of science fiction are dubious of so-called " science fiction " titles offered by reputable publishers who are now encouraging well-known novelists in the normal literary field to enter this highly specialised medium. About 1% of such novels conform to the standards so slowly evolved over the years by the specialist authors.

As John Wyndham has pointed out many times both in articles and discussions, " over the years there has evolved a certain framework within which the pattern of science fiction stories are expected to remain—a code of literary ethics the readers accept but beyond which the writer must not go if he expects to remain credible." Well-known novelists have no knowledge of this code and consequently break all

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the taboos so painstakingly set up by a long line of British and American writers who learned the hard way.

Similarly to the ripples on a lake when a stone is dropped upon its calm surface, so the spate of poor-quality material published in Britain has eventually been washed up on Australian shores, where, because of import restrictions, no American magazines are on sale. Reports from Sydney and Melbourne mirror both the British and American reaction to too much poor material for too long. Readers, retailers and wholesalers are channelling their dissatisfaction back to the publishers. The South African market, similarly deluged with all types of rubbishy literature, dried up last year when the Government imposed an import ban on fiction magazines from Great Britain. Continental Europe, while still in the throes of good solid space-opera shows no sign of being a publishing bonanza.

These rather gloomy findings, however, do not mean that science fiction literature, having experienced a brief boom, will fade away. As magazine fiction it has survived many difficult periods over the past thirty years yet never been completely extinguished. It is largely due to the tenacity of some publishers (both magazine and book), that science fiction as a literature is recognised as such today. In England, for instance, *New Worlds* was published four years *before* any contemporary came into the market and did much to weaken the natural trade resistance to a so-called " new " type of literature when the first shock waves of the American boom hit these shores.

We *can* expect that when all the dead wood has been pruned away science fiction will have found a new level in its struggle for existence and recognition. Meanwhile, the battle continues to win steady readership and in the long run quality will prove of far more worth than quantity.

Summing up the American field and answering his own question " Where is science fiction headed?" Bill Hamling considers that " the science fiction field is a small one—from a hard-core reader standpoint. It can command fairly good transient trade but nothing approaching a (large-scale) figure to put it on a general appeal basis. This field is big enough to support perhaps a dozen steady publications (in U.S.A.), and that dozen won't make any of their publishers millionaires. They can realise a fair profit and that is all. Perhaps the dozen should be cut in half . . . competition in the '40's was merely a possibility—not an actuality. Competition is a good thing and should not be discouraged, but you can saturate a market, at which time it becomes not competition but a battle for survival.

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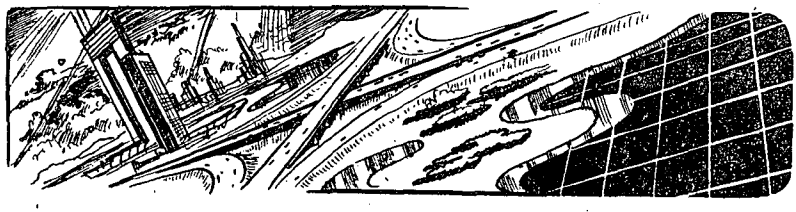
" Thus we start the long road back to normal; titles drop, others may follow; frequencies and pages cut; changes in printing and paper are made to lower costs; word rates are dropped; and so on. Out of the mayhem will emerge those hardy enough to endure. Once again a monthly magazine will stay on sale everywhere for the full on-sale period . . . it will be a long pull but it will work out. Unless, of course, the mythical science fiction boom actually does materialise some day. Man's first trip to the Moon may be the spark needed."

Those comments apply just as aptly to the Birtish science fiction publishing world and to most overseas markets. Luckily, we haven't had quite the same heavy spate of magazines with which to contend, although it has been heavy enough, and there are now signs that an overall interest in science fiction will continue through the winter—Charles Chilton's new B.B.C. serial " Journey Into Space " which will run into 1955, although mediocre in plot and characterisation, is a force with which to be reckoned. Its listening audience is estimated to be about eight millions—a large proportion of those listeners can be called " transients " but from the remainder a small percentage can be expected to become regular readers of magazine science fiction.

The battle is therefore to convert the casual reader into an interested regular reader. Providing he starts off with a good magazine he will become more interested. Should he unhappily come across the rubbish first it is more than possible he will never know there are such advanced literate magazines as *New Worlds*, *Astounding* and *Galaxy*.

While publishers such as ourselves will strive to publish the best possible short stories and serials in the *genre* it is up to the regular readers to promote news of the good magazines amongst their friends. Word of mouth recommendation is worth far more than paid advertising.

John Carnell



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Assuming that humanity achieves inter-stellar flight, communication problems are going to be virtually insurmountable, for radio and radar waves would take centuries to struggle across the deeps of space in the wake of faster-than-light transport. One method of ensuring important messages reaching their destinations on time would be to send them by human beings !

THE MESSENGERS

By Lan Wright

Illustrated by QUINN

I.

In the twenty-third century mankind reached the stars, and by the twenty-fifth century ten thousand planets in a thousand star systems bore the mark of the hand of Man.

Only one piece in the complicated puzzle of social and economic evolution remained to be fitted, and that missing piece was *rapid communication.* Radio and televisor techniques had not kept pace with the development of interstellar flight and, although a stellar cruiser could reach Sirius in a week, radio messages still took over eight years.

All the advantages which instantaneous communication could give were denied to Man during the most important stage of his racial evolution; the period when he passed from a planetary creature to a Galactic being.

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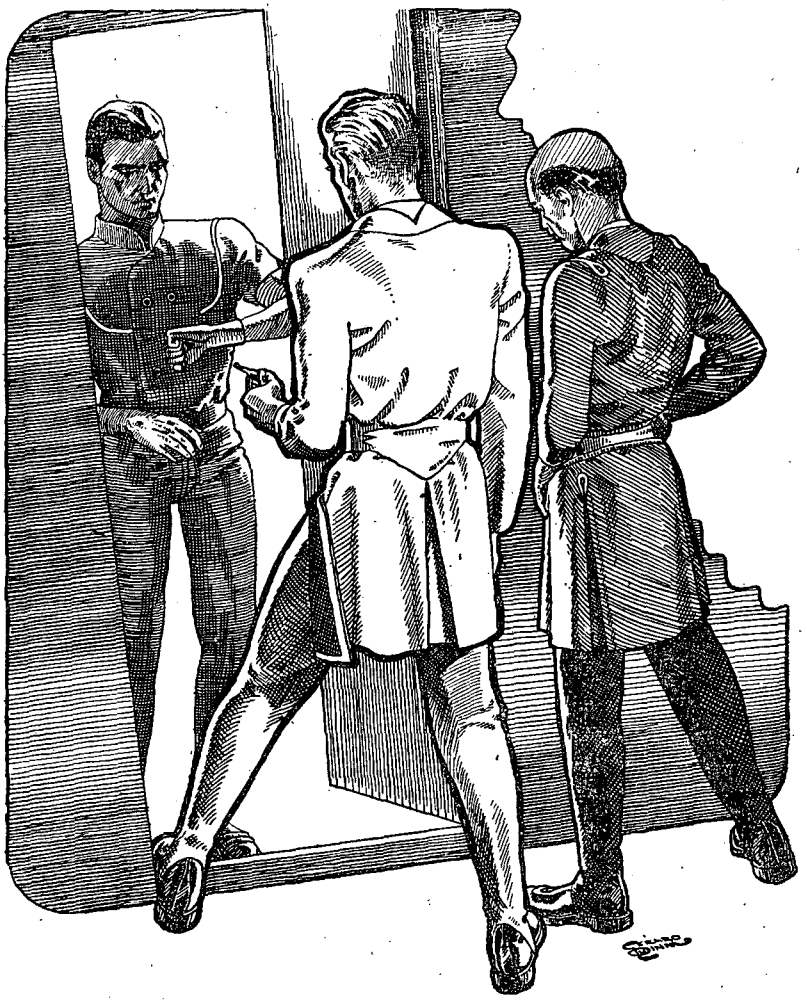

Under such conditions were born the Messengers, a body of men and women whose job it was to carry vital documents and other precious or valuable objects from one planet to another throughout the Galaxy that was Man's growing domain. They carried with them the greatest secrets of human diplomacy and politics. By their loyalty

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and devotion they helped to mould the policies by which their race became strong. They carried the most cherished hopes and ambitions of private individuals; they transported fortunes for some, and death for others.

Their pay was high; those who completed the ten-year period of service died as millionaires, and those who did not live that long were kings among men until they paid the ultimate price for their loyalty.

Some of the messengers were famous; others were unknown; but many of them died performing their duties, for, as with every organisation of power, they had their enemies and these, too, were powerful. There were no barriers to those who wished to join the Messengers, the only requirements were intelligence, resource and physical capability. Many a criminal whose last hope of a decent life had gone found the excitement, the glamour, and the loyalty that he had always sought, within the ranks of the Messengers, and none was ever known to betray the trust placed in him.

There were no laws or rules for those who wore the tiny, silver comet badge of the Messengers. The only edict by which they lived was, ' Deliver your charge, or destroy it,' and the only occasions on which that rule was broken was when the Messenger concerned was dead.

* * *

The back of the grey, metal card read:- " Age, thirty-four. Hair, black. Eyes, blue. Height, six feet three inches. Broad in proportion. Weight two hundred and four pounds. Characteristics: scar on left cheek from eyebrow to chin. Left hand missing and replaced by a false fist of flesh-coloured metal. Intelligence quotient—one fifty. Personality rating—major plus. Comprehensive reaction—five point three percent above normal. Psychological tendencies—plethoric progressive.

On the front of the card was a photograph and the inscription: Slade, Robert Hendryk. Messenger, four years' service."

The fat, bald-headed man seated in the comfortable chair on the other side of the low metal desk, turned the card slowly in his pudgy hands, and his large watery eyes moved from it to the man seated opposite him.

" So, you're Slade." The voice was flat and unemotional, almost it was uninterested as it made a statement that called for no reply.

He returned the card to its owner, and Slade didn't bother to say anything as he returned it to its place within the pocket inside his jerkin. All the while his eyes were on the fat man, seeking, probing, remembering. Slade was always careful to look over the people for

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whom he was to work; he liked to remember them well for future reference, and, too, he liked trying to analyse them, for a correct analysis could tell whether the job he was to do would be good, bad, or indifferent. This one was going to be dirty.

" I've heard of you," the fat man went on.

Slade leaned forward to rest his elbows on the desk, his eyes flickering a trifle as he answered easily, " Then you're one of the few people who have."

" I make it my business to know about people who are important enough not to be publicised. They are the ones who are the most useful—and the most dangerous. You are one of those unfortunates."

" Unfortunates?"

The fat man smiled, the tip of his red tongue showing wetly and obscenely between his rolypoly lips.

" Certainly. It is the unknown and important who die violent deaths. The Messengers who are well known to the public at large are usually the ones who live to see their retirement. Those who are not so well known—" he shrugged, "—they are the ones who get most of the dangerous jobs. I see that you have done four years. That leaves you with about a year to go, in theory."

Slade smiled icily. " But not in practice. I aim to see my three score and ten go up on the board."

" I wish you luck." There was irony in the fat man's voice as he spoke.

Slade shifted irritably in his chair. " You didn't come here to discuss the mathematical possibilities of my survival," he said tartly. " You have a job."

The fat man nodded. " Yes, and a very important one. That was why I requested your services."

" You were lucky to get me. I only got in from Procyon Three yesterday."

" I know." The fat man was quite unconcerned. " I arranged for that assignment in order that you would be available to me here, on Luther Two."

Slade shifted again in his chair, a prickle of uneasiness running down his spine. " Then you must have known that I was on Procyon Three?"

" That is correct."

" Your resources are—remarkable."

The fat man bowed as far as his paunch would allow, and the result was ludicrous in the extreme. He said, " Neither did I come here to talk about them. As you said, I have a job."

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He reached into his pocket and brought out a small metal case which Slade recognised as a portable electronic safe. He operated the tiny personal lock and took out a slender roll of material which he passed across the desk to Slade. As he took it Slade saw that it was a small roll of microfilm. He looked at the fat man with raised eyebrows; there were many more modern and much safer ways of transporting information.

The fat man smiled and nodded. "I know it is archaic, still, I have my reasons. Now, listen carefully. That roll of film has to be delivered to a man named Vincent Antoniades at the Grand Hotel in Cairo on September the fifteenth at midday precisely."

Slade grinned slightly. "Cairo—where?" he enquired gently.

The fat man frowned irritably as he realised his slip, for there were at least eight Cairos scattered throughout the Galaxy, each of them a monument to the peripatetic Egyptian.

"The original of course, on Earth."

Slade nodded.

"Today is the fifth of May. That gives you about fourteen weeks to do the journey. If you travel by the express liners you should do it in thirteen, but I anticipate trouble for you."

"You think I may be delayed?"

The fat man smiled humourlessly. "I think many things, my friend. But—yes, I think you will be delayed. How you travel and what route you take, that is your own affair of course. I only emphasise that the film shall reach Cairo by the date I have stipulated. Should it appear likely to fall into the wrong hands at any time you will destroy it instantly."

"I know the Edict," replied Slade coldly. "But if it's that important why don't I memorise it? There would be nothing to steal then."

The fat man shook his head. "No. I am aware that you are a complete eidetic, but there are reasons against that procedure."

Slade shrugged and reached inside the top drawer of his desk to take out a copy of the application for the official engagement of a Messenger.

"I have already completed one of those in your main office three days ago," the fat man told him.

Slade frowned but said nothing, and put the form back in his drawer. The more he thought about it, the more he knew that this was going to be a very dirty job indeed.

He reached into another drawer lower down in the side of the desk and took out the small plastic case which was the standard carrier for all Messengers. Anything too big to go inside was accommodated in a larger container drawn from the main Messenger office on the ground

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floor. This particular model was large enough for most ordinary jobs. He operated the tiny electronic time lock with expert ease, but before he could put the film inside the fat man leaned forward and stopped him quickly.

" No, no Mister Slade. I do not want a carrier used in this instance."

" But if you're so afraid of it being stolen—" Slade was rapidly losing patience with the peculiarities of his odd and unsavoury customer.

" I am quite well aware that should your carrier be stolen and should someone else attempt to open it, that the contents will be instantly destroyed," broke in the fat man. " But as I said before, I have considerable resources. That is why I chose you for this job. My information tells me that your false hand is not all that it appears to be."

Slade sat very still in his chair, his eyes narrowed to flinty grimness as he weighed up the cool insolence of the other.

" So?" he said softly.

"I happen to know, for instance," smiled the fat man, " that you have a large cavity in it which can be disclosed by pressing the nail of the third finger clenched into the palm, and that, on occasion, you have found it convenient for your own special uses. I do not know whether you have ever used it to transport smaller types of Messenger carriers, but that is what I wish you to do in this case."

Slade didn't move, but there was a tension through his whole being which recognised in the person seated before him someone to be reckoned with and to be avoided. Unfortunately, avoidance was now impossible.

" I wish you to use that secret cavity on my behalf," went on the fat man. " And I wish you to take your personal carrier down to the main office and have it check-sealed for use, just as you would in the normal way. You will tell no one of the substitution which has taken place, not even your superiors in the Messenger service."

Slade stood up slowly, towering over the bulky form of his mysterious customer. " Look, I don't know what your game is—"

" I am hiring a Messenger." The fat man spread his hands wide and smiled disarmingly. " I believe that it is usual for the customer to pass on direct any special instructions that he has to give?"

" These are rather more than just special," said Slade icily.

" Nevertheless, you cannot refuse."

Slade stood tensed for a long moment, then he relaxed. The fat man obviously knew what he was about, and no Messenger could refuse a mission with impunity.

Slade sat down and nodded resignedly. " All right. On your own head be it. There are few people who know about this fist of mine,

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but even one would be too many if it were known that I was using it for a Messenger job."

He reached into the palm of his false left fist and pressed the nail of the third finger. The fat man leaned forward and watched with obvious interest as a large cavity appeared in the back of the hand. Slade dropped the film inside and closed the panel again. Where the sliding panel moved into place there was not a shadow of a join. It fitted as closely as two Johanson blocks.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"Eminently. And now, we will go down to the main office and time-seal your carrier."

The fat man was smart, Slade admitted to himself, and he knew a good deal more about Messenger routine than any self-respecting citizen outside the service had any right to know. The fact that a Messenger carrier would be time-set to operate only at a certain time and only by the Messenger who carried it, was a fact that was not generally known. If anyone tried to tamper with the contents, or force it open illegally, then the contents were churned instantly to a mass of unidentifiable ash. Even if anyone managed to get hold of a carrier, knew the time on which it was due to be opened and knew the combination that would open it, still it would be useless information, for the touch of anyone else on the lock but the Messenger concerned had exactly the same effect on the contents. They would be rendered useless.

Slade took the fat man down to the main offices and handed the carrier over to the man behind the front desk.

"Time check for eleven fifty-five, September fifteenth," he told him, and they stood and watched while the carrier went through the electronically-operated setting machine which tuned the lock to within a thousandth of a second of the time required. At the operator's request Slade put his right hand inside the large slot at one side of the machine, and felt the gentle ruffle of plastic over his finger tips as the machine tuned the carrier lock to his touch.

He took the carrier back and slid it inside his tunic pocket. He led the way out of the front office without speaking and paused in the entrance hall.

"Satisfied?" he asked sarcastically.

"Perfectly." The fat man smiled and inclined his head with mocking patronage that made Slade wish he could slap him with the bulky metal of his false fist. Instead he asked casually, "Might I enquire the name of my employer?"

"It is not necessary to your mission."

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Slade raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Nevertheless—"

"If you insist, the name is Smith." The other smiled ironically, turned and walked towards the main entrance with a rolling gait which seemed to emphasise his gross obesity.

Slade watched him until he was out of sight. The desire of his employer for complete anonimity surprised him considerably, for he had never known it happen in all his four hectic years in the service. It was odd but there was nothing to be gained from idle speculation. He turned and went back into the front office. He checked the time of the first Earthward-bound stellar cruiser and found one outward-bound for Lyros, fourth planet of the star Vega, at six the next morning. The ferry connection with the space station was at six that evening, just four hours away. Vega was twenty-eight light years from Earth, twelve fewer than Luther on whose second planet he was at present. He decided quickly to make the trip for Lyros his first stage, for if the fat man was right about his being delayed, then a rapid departure now might confuse whoever else was interested.

He had a passage booked by the clerk and then signed himself out, 'engaged on mission.' By the time he had completed all the other formalities it was two-thirty, and all he had to do was collect his few belongings from his hotel.

II.

The light from the star, Luther, shone on the city with Sol-like brilliance, its warm, yellow light gleaming across the white buildings and the wide streets in perfect imitation of the Sun.

Slade had returned to his hotel direct from the Messenger building and packed his few belongings before checking the light travelling bag with the desk clerk for delivery to the space port where he could pick it up later. With over two hours still to wait before the rocket ferry left for the space station he decided to pass the time with a quiet meal in Luther City's one and only first-class restaurant-cum-bar, and he turned his footsteps in that direction as soon as he left the hotel.

He noticed the two men following him within minutes of leaving the hotel, and he was not in the least surprised, for his own instinct, coupled with the fat man's warning, had prepared him for any such possibility. Indeed he would have been surprised if someone had not been on hand to follow him. The fact that they had shown up so quickly did not unduly disturb him for he still hoped that his departure next morning would frustrate any attempt to join him abroad the Lyros-bound cruiser.

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As he moved leisurely down the wide, tree-lined avenue he made no attempt to lose his two shadows, for long experience had proven that it was better to know just who was watching you than to lose them quickly and worry about every person who came within fifty yards thereafter. After five minutes easy walking he turned in at the ornate entrance of the Blue Room bar and restaurant. He went directly to the bar itself and from a corner table he noticed the unobtrusive arrival of his two shadows. He watched with lowered eyes as they took a table in the far corner of the large room and proceeded, ostentatiously, to ignore him.

Slade ordered a drink and sipped it appreciatively for a minute or two while he meditated his course of action. He was still puzzled about the fat man. There was precious little for him to go on, and he did not have sufficient time to make more discreet enquiries as the situation demanded. He decided at last on a more direct approach to the problem, though he realised that it was unlikely to add substantially to his store of knowledge. He rose and made his way to one of the enclosed telebooths which lined one wall of the bar room. He closed the door behind him and dialled the number of the local Messenger offices. A pretty brunette appeared on the small screen, smiled, and asked, " Yes, Mister Slade?"

" Give me Central Information, Jeannie."

The brunette was replaced by another woman, older, blonde, and more sophisticated.

" Hallo, Bob."

" Scramble it, Sophie," he ordered briefly.

The blonde nodded and made quick movements off screen with her hands. Slade punched a pattern of three in a row of a dozen red buttons on the board below the screen, and then turned his attention back to the blonde.

" All safe," she told him with a smile.

" Good. Subject, my latest assignment. Question number one. Who is the customer?"

The blonde reached off screen and consulted a file which was somewhere outside the range of the viewer. " A man named Smith," she replied.

Slade chuckled appreciatively; he might have guessed. " Question two. How long ago was it booked?"

" The ninth. Three days."

Well, that checked. Three days ago he had been en route from Procyon Three, and the confirmation was merely proof that the fat man had not boasted when he spoke of his resources.

" Any insurance taken out?"

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Sophie consulted the file and frowned. "Sorry, Bob. That's classified. Not for general release even to the operator."

Slade nodded but made no comment. He could think of nothing which could make the question of insurance a matter of secrecy. Every item carried by the Messenger organisation was normally insured by the customer, who paid premiums according to the value of the articles being carried. The rates were very low because there was less than a one-third of one per cent chance of the insurance company having to pay out. Even so, knowledge of the actual amount of the premiums involved could give the operator an insight into the value of the article he was carrying. Such information often helped in his estimation of the amount of trouble he was likely to have. Yet, in this case, the information was secret.

"Who filed the job, Sophie?"

"Mister Lawson, in person."

Yet another odd feature. It was unusual for the branch manager to deal direct with the customers orders unless official government, or other diplomatic business, were involved. Yet Lawson had done so in this case.

"Sophie, did Smith ask personally for Mister Lawson to handle the job?"

"No, Bob. I was out front at the time, and he came in to register his assignment. He demanded that you be the one to handle it, but I told him you were not available and we didn't know when you would be. Anyway, he insisted you'd be along in a few days, so I passed him on to Mister Lawson as the easiest way to deal with a crackpot."

Slade nodded and stood before the screen deep in thought for several long seconds. Then he said, "Thanks, Sophie. I'll send you some real orchids from Earth when I get home." Then he broke the connection.

He left the booth and noted that the two men were still seated on the opposite side of the room, yet there was a subtle difference in their manner which he could not evaluate at once. Where previously they had ignored him, now, they watched him with a covert closeness. He sat down and looked at his drink. It was so very obvious that it was almost laughable, and yet he knew from experience that it was the obvious devices which were so often the most successful. Well, he wouldn't disappoint them.

As yet it was barely three thirty, local time, and the rocket vessel to the great stellar space station was not due out for well over two hours. From the space station, some three hundred miles out, he would board

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the great stellar cruiser that would carry him to Lyros on the first stage of his journey to Earth.

He had two hours to kill, and, presuming the drug was neither fatal (which was unlikely), nor too strong, he could safely play his shadows for another half hour at least. He called the waiter and ordered a meal and a magazine, the latter to read while he waited for the former. The drink he did not touch.

When the meal came he pushed the drink to one side and noted with grim amusement the quick, frustrated glance which passed between the two men. He dawdled over each of the four small courses, reading for a few minutes between each, and finally at ten past four he pushed the cheese and biscuits from him, drained the cup of synthetic coffee, laid the magazine aside, and reached for the tall glass at the side of the table. It was still three parts full.

He debated a moment and decided that half the contents would be sufficient. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the two men tense slightly in their seats, though the movement would not have been noticeable had he not been looking for it. He lifted the glass and took a long pull. Whatever it was could not be detected, and as he set the glass down carefully there was a quick rush of blood to his face. His eyes blurred and went out of focus, and then, in a dark rush of nausea, utter blackness closed over him.

He came to slowly. His tongue moved uncertainly in a nauseous fur which coated the inside of his mouth, and light beat through his eyelids so that he closed them still tighter in an effort to prevent further discomfort to his pounding head. He was about to move his arms and legs tentatively when a murmur of voices pushed through the dull ache in his head, and he froze instinctively, relaxing to his former inertness as his brain sent rapid danger signals along his nerves.

". . . not on him. Then where the hell is it?"

" We've checked his baggage and it wasn't there. It must be on him somewhere."

" Perhaps he swallowed it."

" Don't be so damned funny. Look, he'll be coming round any minute now. You two had better get out of here and leave me to settle the rest of it."

Dimly, he heard the shuffle of feet and the faint, angry protest of the second speaker's voice, then the door closed, but still he didn't move. He was aware of someone bending over to look at him and he knew that his chances of maintaining a successful sham under close scrutiny were remote; he moved a little and groaned. Someone grasped his shoulder and shook him gently, and the familiar voice of the first speaker said, " That's right, fellow. Snap out of it. You'll be all right."

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He struggled to a sitting position, his eyes blinking dazedly in the glare of artificial lighting. The movement made his head reel sickeningly while his stomach heaved ominously. He took a glass that was thrust into his hand and drained it at a gulp, savouring the cool peppermint flavour as it rolled down his throat and settled in his abdomen. After a few minutes the sickness had gone and his head began to clear.

Slade found that he was sitting on a couch in a large, tastefully furnished room; a tall, slim, well dressed man was smiling down at him.

"How do you feel?"

"Rough. Very rough." Slade rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Thanks for the treatment. What happened?"

"You must have had quite a few drinks before you came here. The barman tells me you only had one and went out like a light."

So that was to be the story, thought Slade grimly. Aloud, he said, "Nope. That was my first today."

The man ignored the obvious. "My name's Ripley. I'm the manager here."

"Ah, I wondered." Slade stood up, stretching his taut muscles, and found, surprisingly, that the movement had no ill effects. His head still ached slightly, but at least he was mobile. The clock on the wall pointed to four-forty-five, which gave him just an hour to make the space field.

"Well, thanks for looking after me, Ripley," he offered. "Now, could I impose further on your hospitality and ask you to get me a cab?"

"Surely." Ripley crossed to a phone which stood on the large, paper-littered desk beneath the window, and made the necessary call, then he picked a small sheet of paper from the desk and presented it to Slade with a smile. "Your bill. You haven't had a chance to pay it."

Slade laughed outright and pulled out his notecase. "Here, give the change to the barman." He pushed two notes across the desk. "So long, Ripley, and thanks for everything."

III.

As he sank back in the padded comfort of the cab, Slade felt in his inner pocket and took out the carrier. He examined it closely for several seconds, and then replaced it, his puzzlement increasing as he did so. There was no sign that it had been tampered with in any way, and yet, from the brief conversation he had overheard in Ripley's office, it was clear that more than one person knew it was empty.

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The only reasonable explanation was that someone had learned from the fat man that Slade was concealing the roll of film elsewhere, and yet, if they knew that much why didn't they know also that the alternative hiding place was inside his false fist. Slade could hardly imagine the fat man letting his right hand know what his left was doing, and it seemed very doubtful that he would let anyone else know of his plans regarding transport of the film.

The gates of the space field came into view, and he abandoned the idle speculation under the knowledge that he was hardly likely to be able to guess at the correct answer to the riddle.

As he left the cab he found he had five minutes before the rocket ferry was due to leave, and a careful scrutiny of the road leading to the field was enough to satisfy him that he had not been followed since leaving the Blue Room. It seemed that his opponents, whoever they were, did not think that he would leave Luther so quickly, and he felt mildly pleased with the success of his plan.

The first stage of the long journey to Earth was quite uneventful, and it was six weeks to the day after leaving Luther that he landed on Lyros, the fourth planet of the star Vega. Slade was under no illusions that the peace of his journey would remain undisturbed. There was a four-day stop at Lyros before he could take the next liner on to Sirius Five, and four days was plenty of time for the shadows, or their successors, to catch up with him, provided they had resources to hire private charter vessels.

Slade spent most of the six-week trip in comparative isolation. He was deliberately self-effacing and avoided the rest of the passengers as far as was possible. He knew that, should he leave Lyros before they caught up with him, there would be hurried enquiries of other passengers in an effort to find out where he was heading next. The fact that he made no casual friends or acquaintances was bound to draw attention to him in one way, but at least it prevented inquisitive questions about his ultimate destination and the purpose of his trip. What the other passengers didn't know would not hurt them—or him.

He was twenty-four hours in the space spation at Lyros before being ferried down to the planet itself. Those twenty-four hours were cluttered with customs inspections, medical checks, and all the other paraphenalia that went with an under-developed world, but at last he was able to set foot thankfully on the red soil of the planet and breathe a deep, appreciative breath of fresh, cold air, the first for a month and a half.

Slade registered at the Garden City Hotel for his three-day stay, that being the only reasonably respectable hostelry in the badly misnamed city. Lyros itself was a frontier world, wild and untamed,

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save for a fifty square mile stretch which contained Garden City, the space field, and a few tiny outlying posts. The rest of the planet was a haven for the explorer, the scientist, and the adventurer, for there were fortunes to be wrested from the huge, untapped natural resources of the planet which lay in the wild mountainous reaches of the one great land mass. A man with courage and luck—plus a fast-shooting gun—could become a millionaire overnight, and many people came to Lyros to do just that.

Before he joined the Messengers Slade had visited Lyros and spent one hectic year fighting the natural obstacles of the world. He had had the courage, and the gun, but the luck was not with him. He made a small strike of iridium that brought him in fifty thousand credits from the Terran Assay Office, and then he proceeded to lose half of it in a crooked dice game. The other went to a diamond-eyed dancing girl in whose bed he had awakened after a twenty-four hour drugged sleep. The girl, of course, had gone.

He smiled reminiscently as he unpacked his single travelling bag in the privacy of his hotel room. He had been younger then, but now? He made up his mind to tour some of the dives and see if there was anyone left whom he remembered from the old days. He'd left more than one friend behind him then.

A knock at the door disturbed his reverie. He called, "Come," and turned to see who his unexpected visitor was.

The man who entered was tall, dark, and had a clean-cut air of authority about him that lessened Slade's sudden suspicions.

"Robert Slade?"

"That's right."

"My name is Archer."

Slade motioned him to a chair, and seated himself on the edge of the bed. "What can I do for you, Mister Archer?"

"Quite a lot, I hope." Archer looked at him with dark, penetrating eyes. "I am a member of the Stellar Corps." He reached inside his jacket as he spoke and passed a small scarlet badge for Slade's inspection.

Slade's glance was only perfunctory as his eyebrows rose sharply and then settled into a frown. His past experiences with the Galactic Police force had not been exactly friendly affairs. By joining the Messengers he had automatically placed himself outside the grip of the normal forces of the law, but that fact did nothing to remove the slight apprehension he felt as he learned who his visitor was. It was a sensation which momentarily shrank his stomach muscles and made the glands at the back of his mouth and throat dry slightly as he waited for the other to continue.

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"I arrived yesterday by a Corps tender direct from Luther Two," Archer went on. "I know quite a lot about you, Slade."

Slade's eyebrows drew together in a slight frown, but his lips crinkled in a mirthless smile. "So?"

Archer shifted in his seat, and Slade thought that he looked a trifle uneasy, as if uncertain how to approach the subject at hand.

"Look, Slade," he said after a pause. "I know the Messengers' oath of service, and I know that they are beyond the normal grip of Galactic law. In practice I can't touch you, all I can do is ask for your co-operation. Whether you give it or not is up to you."

Slade sat quiet and still. Having judged the situation correctly he guessed that it would be to his advantage to force the initiative on to the police officer. If he could, by his own silence, increase Archer's obvious discomfort, it was more than possible that he would find out considerably more than Archer had come prepared to tell him. He stared silently at his visitor, and not by so much as a flicker of an eyelid did he betray any interest or surprise at Archer's statement.

Archer paused, quite obviously expecting some reaction. When none came he drew a deep breath and continued, "We know that, on Luther Two, you were given a mission by a man named Smith, and we know, too, that you were drugged and robbed before you left the planet. Since you continued your journey at once it was clear that the thieves did not get what they were after. The fact that an attempt was made to rob you indicates also that the thieves were aware that you were not using your carrier. If you had, then there was no point in them making the attempt—unless, of course, they were unaware of the safeguards that protect your carriers." He looked down at the floor between his feet. "I cannot think that they would be so amateurish as to be without that knowledge."

He looked up at Slade, who maintained his attitude of stony, indifferent silence.

"The article which is causing so much interest is of more than ordinary interest, Slade. It is important enough for the man, Smith, to go to peculiarly elaborate lengths to protect it. It is important enough for at least one other group to go to considerable trouble to get it, and it is important enough for the Stellar Corps to send me to ask you for it.

"If anyone else manages to get it, Slade, you will be dead. If the Corps get it, peacefully, you will be alive."

As Archer finished speaking the astonishment which had been growing within Slade as he listened turned slowly to cold, hard anger. A redness pulsed through the thick, ugly scar on his left cheek, but that was all. Still, he did not move.

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He said, calmly, " You want me to surrender my — trust to you?"

Archer looked surprised. " Yes. Yes, that's it."

" By heaven, you've got a nerve." Slade's voice was brittle with suppressed viciousness. " When you joined the Corps you took an oath of service which death itself would not make you violate. Yet you come here and ask me to break the one that I took when I joined the Messengers." He stood up, towering over the seated figure of the Corps man. " If I did that, how long do you think the Messengers would let me live? You're a fool, Archer."

" We'll give you a million credits and a free, secret passage to any part of the Universe in a Corps tender."

In spite of himself Slade's jaw dropped in surprise. The offer was

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—not generous—it was fantastic. If it did nothing else it gave him yet another clue to the value of the tiny roll of film hidden in his fist.

Archer's face creased into an ironic smile as he saw the surprise on Slade's face.

"Generous, isn't it, Slade?" he asked. "Now, what about it?"

The surprise was wearing off a bit now, and as it went it was being replaced by an awareness that, from here on, he would have to be more careful than he had ever before been in his whole career.

He wondered briefly if this was the job which most Messengers met sometime or other, the one that mattered—the last one.

"No, Archer," he said. "Not for twice that amount. I'd never live to spend it."

"We'd guarantee your protection."

"You couldn't."

Archer eyed him angrily for a long moment as he was considering what his next move was to be. Then he said, "All right, Slade, name your own price. Oh, I know you have one." He waved aside the protest that rose to Slade's lips. "I saw your record back on Earth a year or so back. You'd have sold your soul for a million credits then, and I don't see why you should have changed. What do you want, name it."

The red vein throbbed urgently beside the scar, but the rest of Slade's face was dead white. His teeth clenched as he said, softly, "Get out of here, Archer."

"Sure, you can chop a man to death with that metal club you call a fist." Archer stood up. "Well, why not? This wouldn't be the first murder you've committed, would it? And the Messenger organisation would cover for you."

For a moment they stood staring angrily at each other, and then the emotion slid from Archer's face. He leaned forward suddenly, an urgent light of appeal in his dark eyes.

"I'm sorry, Slade, I shouldn't have blown my top like that. But listen, your whole slate can be wiped clean. With a million credits you can start up again, and we'll help you. You can disappear. Why, with a bit of plastic surgery—"

"On this hand?" Slade waved the almost lifelike metal fist in Archer's face and laughed harshly. "Get out of here, Archer, before I break your head."

Archer straightened slowly and backed towards the door. He seemed without emotion now that he had done all that he could, and the dark eyes that, bare moments before, had flashed with irony and sarcasm, that had taunted and sneered and implored, were lifeless and unconcerned, all emotion washed from them.

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"It's a pity, Slade," he remarked almost casually. "You don't know how big this thing is that you're mixed up with. If you let the Corps help you, they would have protected you. With this chance you could have done anything, had anything. Now—?" he shrugged. "The Corps doesn't play it straight when they want something as badly as they want what you're carrying. You've got two enemies now—maybe three, I don't know."

"Two?"

"Sure. The Corps and the people who tried to rob you." He laughed humorlessly. "Yes, maybe it's three—I almost forgot the Messengers."

He was gone rapidly out of the door before Slade could move to stop him or could ask him what he meant. He made no attempt to follow Archer for it would have served no useful purpose.

Slade sat down on the bed, forcing his thoughts into calmer channels, for anger and emotion could not help the logical evaluation he wanted to make. He lit a cigarette and smoked it easily allowing himself to relax beneath the soothing influence of the nicotine while his mind sifted and sorted the facts which Archer, consciously or unconsciously, had given him.

The very fact that the Stellar Corps were so anxious to get possession of the film was, in itself, the most important clue to its value.

The film? The article?

Now that he thought about it Archer had never once mentioned a roll of film. He had referred to it as the 'article,' and that implied that he did not know just what it was that Slade was carrying. Yet he knew of its importance? He was able to put a valuation on it in terms of money? Slade frowned at the glaring inconsistency, and pondered on the peculiarity of the manner in which the Corps had chosen to approach him. All that the visit had accomplished was to put him on his guard and arouse his curiosity—and that was quite unlike the Corps' usual way of working. Unless of course they had relied on his pre-Messenger record.

Slade smiled grimly to himself. Once a thief . . . Archer had made the mistake of thinking that the Corps were all-powerful, and Slade did not dispute the fact—up to a point. That point did not include the Messengers' organisation. A body such as theirs could not be on the same level as the ordinary forces of law and order; they had to be above it; they had to be a law unto themselves. They paid for the loyalty of their members, but their vengeance could be swift and utterly complete if that loyalty was broken.

The immediate problem of the microfilm pushed itself to the fore-

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front of his thoughts. The sudden interest of so many people was a red light that Slade had no intention of ignoring, for he realised all too well that this was something quite outside the ordinary Messenger missions. He had no false modesty when he considered his own capabilities, and the fact that the fat man also appreciated them enough to go to considerable trouble to obtain his services was proof to him of the importance of the tiny, black roll inside his fist.

The Stellar Corps was something else again, and Slade wondered if the fat man's warning that he might be ' delayed ' had been intended as a reference to the ordinary forces of law and order.

He pressed the false nail inside his fist and emptied the roll into the palm of his right hand. He held it up to the light between the first two fingers of his hand so that one panel was in front of the light, but the inscriptions were far too small for him to decipher.

He crossed to the window and pulled down the blind to darken the room, then he switched on the light beside his bed, took a thick piece of cardboard from the base of the writing pad on the table, and cut a small square in the middle of it just big enough to take one panel of the film. He held the film across the aperture and placed the whole thing in front of the bulb so that the reflection was thrown on to the blank wall at the other end of the small room.

The result was not as clear as he could have wished for, but it was enough for him to see that the figures and letters were part of an elaborate code which he would be unlikely to break without the help of an expert.

Slade didn't bother to puzzle long over the slightly blurred script. He returned the film to his fist, switched off the lamp and let the blind up. Then he sat on the bed and relaxed for a long, silent period of thought.

IV.

Nearly half an hour passed, and then he rose and pulled on his jerkin. He took the elevator to the ground floor and walked out through the lounge. There was no sign of Archer as he passed through it, but a casual glance thrown at him from a small, dapper man who sat reading a newspaper in one corner, was enough to convince him that he was not entirely unobserved.

Outside the hotel he hailed a cab and climbed in. The purple shadows of the night were coming down over the city as he was whisked across to the less salubrious part of Garden City. His choice of destination had caused the cabby to leer and wink knowingly, but Slade ignored him.

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Around the hotel there were at least some pretentions at decorum and respectability, for there was centered the imposing buildings of the banks, trading corporations, shops and theatres. But these were merely a facade for the true brawling, lusty side of the city's life which was the rule rather than the exception. The area to which the taxi took him was garish and violent. It was made up of street upon street of one and two storey buildings which housed the gambling dens, drink palaces and dance halls that formed two-thirds of the reason for Garden City's existence. There were other places too, hidden in the back streets behind the more legitimate centres of amusement. Large one-room dives and cellars with selections of small booths and odd forms of entertainment, places that catered for every sordid vice and perversion to which mankind was addicted.

A dozen kinds of dope were peddled openly in the streets and dens, and a thousand women of a score of different races flaunted their dubious charms in the bars and brothels. The seamy side of Garden City was a mile wide and two stories high.

The cab dropped Slade on the edge of the district, known ironically but truthfully as the Weeds, and he waited until it had vanished before moving in the direction of his destination. As he stood there his eyes scanned the broad street for signs that he was being followed, and he spotted another cab cruising along slowly about a hundred yards away. He smiled slightly as he saw it. Whoever was following him either didn't know his job or didn't know the Weeds. Slade decided that it was the latter.

He turned directly off the broad main road into a narrow side street. He followed it for some fifty yards, and then made half a dozen rapid and haphazard turns before finally stopping. He waited on a corner in the shadow of a doorway for nearly five minutes, but nobody appeared who was suspicious. More slowly now, he headed more of less in a straight line directly towards the centre of the Weeds, his eyes seeking old-remembered landmarks with eager, wistful anticipation.

When a man turns from the wrong side of the law to the right side, he usually attempts to leave his old life as far behind him as he can. Slade was the exception. He joined the Messengers as a matter of personal expediency, but he was far-sighted enough to see the advantages his lawless experiences could give him if he treated them with the care which his new occupation demanded.

He kept up old friendships and he remembered old lessons; he never forgot a friend, or an enemy, and he treated both as he would have expected them to treat him. The lessons which a man learns on the wrong side of the law are among the most valuable of his whole life, and, illicit though they may be, they give him a head start over ordinary

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mortals when he turns to the straight and narrow path of righteousness.

Any other Messenger but Slade would have treated his assignment as just another job, and would have continued incuriously to avoid all and any obstacle until the roll of film was safely in the hands of Vincent Antoniades. In the case of Slade the many peculiar features of the assignment aroused a criminally bred sense of suspicion. The odd directions that the fat man had given; the almost illicit suggestion from Archer that he should hand the film over to the Corps; these, and other clues were the telltale warning lights that danger lurked in every light year between him and Earth. He knew that he would be better able to deal with those dangers if he could find out what the contents of the film were.

Slade walked quickly and purposefully through the maze of narrow, ill-lit streets. The only light, now that darkness had come, was from the open doors and uncovered windows of the bars and cafes, and with the lights came the raucous blare of canned music and the low hum of human voices. The only disturbances to the overall pattern were occasional shrieks of laughter or rage or pain which rang startlingly over the general buzz. Under the dark night skies of Lyros the Weeds bubbled as evilly as any witches' brew.

Six or seven minutes walk brought Slade to a narrow back alley off one of the wider and more open streets. It was short, dark and evil-looking, a cul-de-sac which led directly to an ill-lit door above which a broken neon sign proclaimed that the building was " Jupiter's Club."

As Slade entered the doorway a belligerent, bearded giant of a man rose to bar his way.

Slade halted. " Hallo, Tiny."

The giant hesitated, his red, piggy eyes narrowing as he sought recognition under the dim light of a single bulb.

" By the stars ! Slade? Where in hell did you spring from?" The voice was deep throated and gravelly, tinged with the indefinable accent of the space rover.

" Luther," replied Slade. " Is Jupiter about?"

" Sure, back of the bar, like always." The giant moved aside and waved a huge hand over his shoulder towards the heavy, draped curtain which separated the small hallway from the remainder of the Club.

" See you, Tiny." Slade patted the giant's broad chest and passed through into the smoke-laden atmosphere of the dive.

It was typical of hundreds of others strewn throughout the Weeds, typical indeed of a million spread through the frontier worlds of the Galaxy. It was bright and dingy, colorful and sordid, full of life yet

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with an overtone of death. A giant radiogram provided canned music for the miniature dance floor around which were spread some dozen or so tables. Along two of the walls were ten or a dozen booths that provided a measure of privacy for those that wanted it, and in each booth a tri-discreen provided sordid entertainment for the occupants. Along a third wall stood the bar, and behind it half a dozen sweating, unshaven men served every known drink in the Universe.

Slade grinned slightly as he saw the fat bulbous figure of Jupiter Stassen seated at one end of the bar keeping one eye on the till and the other on his customers. He was in just the position that Slade remembered from the last time he had seen him, almost five years before. In fact, as he looked round, Slade realised that nothing had changed, the floor was still littered with cigarette butts, the lights were no brighter and no dimmer than he remembered them, the womens' half naked bodies still glistened and excited. Only the faces above them, and the faces of the customers were different—except Jupiter Stassen's.

A hand pawed his right arm and the wheedling voice of one of the Club women asked, "Buy me a drink, honey? There's a nice quiet booth vacant, an' I know some cute tricks."

She was hard-faced and painted, and her scanty costume revealed considerably more than it covered. He thought of another girl, a long time ago, who had been just like her—only he had been different and thought her beautiful.

He shook his head briefly. "I've got a date with Jupiter."

The girl's eyes flickered uneasily at the mention of Stassen, and she made no further effort to detain him. He walked down the three steps to the floor and threaded his way between the rows of tables towards the bar.

Stassen sat half turned away from him, looking down the polished wooden stretch of the bar top. His eyes were as bright as Slade remembered them, and the chewed, ugly stub of cigar between his blackened teeth was surely the same one that he'd always had.

"Hallo, Jupiter."

The bright, beady eyes turned on him, dispassionate, disinterested and unsurprised. The cigar butt quivered slightly as the thick lips around it moved in speech, but that was the only movement in the round, stone-hard face.

"Wondered what had happened to you, Slade. Heard tell you'd got to be a Messenger."

Slade smiled. For all that Jupiter hardly ever left his Club he had an amazingly wide knowledge of even minor details of life throughout the Galaxy.

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"What else do you hear?"

The cigar twitched again. "You want help; you want some information. You think maybe I can get it for you."

"How'd you guess?"

Stassen shrugged massively and twitched the cigar across to the other side of his mouth. "Men come here for three things, Slade. Drink, dope and women, in that order. To get them they don't have to see me first. You come straight to me when you get here, and I don't figure it's to look at my beauty. Therefore, you want something else, and the only thing I got is information of one sort or another."

Slade considered his reflection in the polished surface of the bar. "Right in one," he answered. "Is the old guy still around who used to be called the Professor? The one with the computing machine for a brain?"

The beady eyes narrowed. "Just about," was the terse reply.

"Just about?"

"His consumption of Blue Dust is rapidly outstripping the supply, and his payments are falling behind."

Slade frowned at the mention of the deadly Venusian dope. It was a drug for which there was no cure for its addicts, and once it had been taken, the craving for it could not be broken however long the victim was kept away from it. It was the last resort of the addicts for whom cocaine, heroin and morphine no longer had any meaning, and it was death to all who took the first dose.

"How long has he been on it?"

Stassen shrugged. "Six, maybe seven months."

"What's his daily dose?"

"Three fifty grains."

Slade whistled. "Then he can't last much longer."

"Long enough to pay me three hundred credits, I hope."

"He owes you that much for dope?"

Stassen nodded.

There was a long silence while Slade considered the position. He needed the Professor's unique talents very badly, whether the man was doped or not. He was in a position to pay well, but he was not in a position to stay away from his hotel too long. There was always the possibility of a call from the local Messenger Office, and a long absence would need some explaining. The only alternative was to trust the roll of film to Stassen's care until such time as he could get the Professor in a fit state to work on it, and that might be twelve or fifteen hours, depending on how long it was since he had his last shot of dope. Slade thought about the Edict—and then he thought about his own personal danger. The Professor's unique mathematical genius

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could, in all probability, solve the coded riddle of the film, and without that information he was helpless.

He made up his mind quickly.

"Stassen," he said quietly. "I've got a roll of film with a lot of information in code on it. I think the Professor can break it, but I daren't stay with him until he does because it'll probably take a long time. I've got to take a chance and leave it with you. It's worth five hundred credits to me if you can get him in shape to do it." He paused and looked the other hard in the eye. "I know I can trust you, Jupiter, but I can't trust anyone else in this place. Is there somewhere we can go and talk?"

Stassen eyed him unemotionally, but Slade could almost see his cash register brain working the margin of profit in the proposition proportionate to the risk involved. He was not unduly worried because he knew from experience that if Stassen undertook a job no amount of bribery or coercion could turn him from completing it. His one virtue was his utter honesty in business dealings.

"Six hundred," he said after a minute. "No need to go anywhere. That's the price, pay it and I'll see the job done."

Slade nodded immediate agreement, he was in no position to haggle. "You want it now?"

"Hang on, there maybe someone watching you."

"I doubt it. I shook my tail all right."

Stassen grunted deprecatingly. "I wouldn't count on it. There are several strange faces here tonight." His eyes roamed busily over the crowded tables. "In about one minute there will be a short power failure," he went on.

Slade looked up sharply, puzzled by the apparent incongruity of the prophecy.

Stassen smiled thinly. "Losing your touch aren't you, Slade? The cut will last about fifteen seconds, and that should be time enough for you to slide the film and the cash across the counter to me. After that you'd better have a few drinks and get respectably drunk. Take one of the girls into a booth for an hour and then get back to your hotel. I'll get in touch with you. When do you leave?"

"Day after tomorrow."

A moment later the lights went out to the accompaniment of screams and yells. Slade flipped the film out of its hiding place and across the bar as Stassen's voice boomed reassuringly through the blackness. "Only a power failure, folks. Have it fixed in a moment."

Six hundred credits followed the film across the polished wood, and seconds later the lights flickered back on again.

"All safe," grunted Stassen, and waved Slade away from the bar with a brief nod of his head.

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V.

Three hours later Slade was back in his hotel room feeling slightly the worse for his debauched camouflage. He was still sober enough to know that he'd not been followed, though the fact that he was not now in possession of the film allowed him to be a little more careless of the possibility than he would have been normally.

He clicked on the light in his room and swore violently at the disorder which greeted him. Whoever the searchers were they had been thorough but not tidy, and a wide selection of split seams testified to the effectiveness of their methods. He locked the door behind him and stood for a few moments surveying the scene, undecided what to do. A dull ache at the back of his head and a queeziness in the pit of his stomach turned him from the task of clearing up, and he dropped wearily on the bed without even bothering to undress.

Slade didn't leave the hotel next day. He slept late and then spent some time in his room repairing the damage done by the searchers. He wandered between his room and the bar and the restaurant, reading the local and imported papers and magazines. When he went to bed at midnight there was still no word from Stassen.

There were still nearly twelve hours to go before the ferry rocket was due to head for the space station, but even so there was a nagging doubt at the back of his mind about the correctness of his judgment in allowing the film out of his hands. He trusted Stassen implicitly, but the man was not infallable especially as he had to rely on third party contacts.

Slade was under no illusion about his fate if it were found out that he had passed his assignment to someone else. Even the fact that he got it back undamaged would not be held in mitigation, and if he didn't get it back . . . None of that could alter the necessity in his own mind, to find out about the contents of the message he was carrying, for without it he was quite unable to judge either the strength or the sympathies of the groups opposing him, or, much more important, the relative danger of his own position.

He awoke early the next morning and lay for some time deep in thought before a waiter brought his breakfast. Then he sat in bed eating without relish and wondering just how Stassen was going to return the film before the ferry took off.

He was due to leave for the ferry port at eleven thirty, and as the time drew nearer he contemplated putting it off and taking a private hire rocket out at the last minute. Then he realised that any such action would probably throw out of gear any plan which Stassen might have devised for contacting him enroute, and he knew that the only

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thing he could do was to act normally and trust to Stassen's ingenuity and genius for organisation.

At eleven twenty he left his room carrying the single case which held his immediate possessions, and made his way down to the ground floor. The lounge was deserted, and he crossed slowly to the desk to settle his account. The clerk greeted him with a professional smile and pushed the already prepared bill across the desk.

"I hope you have enjoyed your stay, Mister Slade?"

"Yes. Thanks." Slade took the bill and endorsed it with his Messenger identification and credit particulars. The local office would handle it. "Yes, I hope I can visit you again."

"Thank you, sir," smiled the clerk. "Oh, I nearly forgot." He reached below desk level. "Your morning paper. I forgot to send it up to you. I am very sorry, but you will be able to read it in the ferry." He laid a carefully folded news sheet on the desk before him.

There was no hesitation in Slade's movements as he put out his hand and flipped a coin on to the desk.

"Thanks," he replied easily. "I'd almost forgotten it myself."

He turned from the desk, folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket, and as he did so he could feel the faint unevenness of a foreign body between the pages of the Garden City News.

Stassen had contacted him.

He picked up his bag and walked out through the swing doors.

In the cab which took him to the ferry port he made no move to look at the paper, except to transfer it to one of his inside pockets, and by the time he reached the space station over an hour later the contents were still unknown to him. Patience was amongst the greatest of a Messenger's virtues.

He passed through the customs, noting that some of his fellow passengers had been with him on the previous stage of his journey. He wondered which of them was an enemy. Speculation was idle he knew, for the most innocent looking among them might well be the most dangerous, and time alone would reveal the answer.

Once aboard the cruiser he went straight to his cabin and locked himself in. He made a careful search to make sure that it had not been specially prepared for his occupation with hidden microphones or cameras—he wouldn't be the first Messenger who had been tricked through connivance between space company employees and other interested parties willing to pay for that connivance.

The search revealed nothing, and the only doubt left at last was a large mirror, fixed and immovable against one wall. For safety he hung a large coat hanger and blouse over it against the possibility of it concealing a camera in the next cabin.

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Then he turned his attention to the newspaper.

He unfolded it and found a small, flat packet sealed into the inner pages with cellotape. Carefully he detached it and took off the outer covering. Inside was the now familiar black roll of film, and a single sheet of extremely thin paper rolled into a capsule. He laid the film on the table beside his bunk and unfolded the sheet of paper. It contained three lines in Stassen's incongruously neat hand.

"*The Professor's beat, Slade. He thinks the message must be a fake because it's too haphazard. I figure he's telling the truth because I hopped him up with so much dope he'd have cracked the Vegan alphabet if he'd had it with him. Sorry.*"

That was all.

Slade read it through twice while a frown of disbelief creased his forehead. It was the last reply he had expected to receive.

He sat down on his bunk, relaxing to allow his mind to consider and accept the facts so baldly stated in the slip of thin paper. Until this moment he had not admitted the possibility of failure from the Professor, and now it had come he realised that he was quite unprepared for it.

Or was it failure?

That was the part which puzzled him. It was too haphazard, the message said. Slade could have rejected it as the ramblings of a dope-crazed degenerate, but he didn't. He knew of old that the one thing in the Professor's life of which it could be said he was successful was his work. The man's mathematical genius was the one light in an otherwise useless existence, and it was a light which only a fanatic could have kept burning.

Having accepted the possibility that the Professor was right, Slade set himself to orientate the fact that the message was a fake with the other data that he had. Like a great, unwieldy jigsaw puzzle that needs one clue the whole thing opened out before him, and the answer, now that he thought about it, was absurdly simple. It explained the fat man's eagerness that he should be on hand at Luther Two to undertake the assignment. It explained why he was not allowed to rely on his eidetic memory to remember the message, and it explained the secrecy regarding the insurance.

Slade almost laughed as he lay on his bunk and thought how impressed he had been when he heard that the amount of the insurance could not be disclosed. He had assumed automatically that the object he carried was of such priceless value that it had been insured for a fabulous, breath-taking sum. He had not looked further; he had not even looked for even more logical reasons—he had not thought that it might not be insured at all because it was utterly worthless.

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He was the pigeon that everyone was following, the lawless and the law. And while he was being followed and watched, tracked and hunted someone else, some other Messenger, was sneaking through with the goods.

The simplicity of the whole scheme amazed him now that he had it open for inspection. As the fat man had stated he was not generally known as one of the more famous Messengers, but he was easily recognisable, and he had a reputation within his own circle of being more than averagely competent at handling unusual and dangerous assignments. What was more natural than that he should be given a job of more than ordinary importance? And how easy to send him off with all the appearance of deep, dark secrecy while allowing enough information to slip out to ensure that he was followed.

Whoever the organisation were at the back of it all they were playing for high stakes, that was very clear. It was no small matter to hire one Messenger for a legitimate cause, but to hire two of them and send one of them off on a wild goose chase—that spoke of resources beyond the average.

A sudden knock at the door disturbed his train of thought.

"What is it?" he asked, and used the slight break that his question caused to push the film back into his false fist, and place the piece of paper in his jerkin pocket.

"Steward, sir," was the reply. "Message from the purser's office."

Slade got off the bunk and crossed to the door to unlock it. He opened it to find two men standing outside, and neither of them wore a steward's uniform. His first impulse was to close the door fast, but the foot of the larger man was too quick for him, and the tiny, metallic glint of a needle gun was an added deterrent to any quick movement. His eyes flickered briefly over their faces, but he recognised neither of them.

With sick apprehension he thought of the piece of paper in his pocket. If they found that they wouldn't look any further for the film; they wouldn't need to.

"May we come in, Mister Slade?" asked the larger man politely, but there was nothing polite in the hand that was planted in Slade's chest and propelled him forcibly back into the cabin.

The second man, small, thin and beady eyed, locked it carefully.

"We wouldn't want to be disturbed," explained his companion, smiling.

"Naturally," agreed Slade coldly.

"There are fifteen minutes before takeoff, Slade," said the large man, handing his needle gun to the other. "It can be a pleasant

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fifteen minutes, or it can be very, very nasty. It's up to you. But if it's nasty then you'll be dead at the end of it if we haven't got that film."

Slade frowned, puzzled. "What film? I——"

The large man scowled, his heavily jowled face twisting angrily. He leaned forward casually and hit Slade viciously across the mouth.

"Why you—" The sudden, urgent movement of the needle gun stopped the involuntary retaliation which tightened Slade's muscles.

"Don't act dumb, Slade. We haven't got time for games."

Slade sat quite still. With a needle gun on him he was in no position to make any sudden move, but he realised that with only fifteen minutes at their disposal his two visitors would have to work fast if they wanted to get the film.

"I can only give you the carrier," he told the large man. "And that won't do you a lot of good. Without me you won't—"

The flinty anger in the other's eyes told him that the bluff wouldn't work. It was obvious that far too many people knew that he had secreted the film elsewhere.

"It won't do, Slade. Now, how about it?"

As he spoke the man slid a small plastic case from his pocket and laid it on the table beside the bunk. He opened it and disclosed a small, beautifully fashioned set of medical instruments, forceps, scalpels, tiny knives, and saws of exquisite workmanship. But Slade knew too well that they weren't ordinary surgical tools. He had seen such sets before, and he had seen the results of their use in the hands of a skilled torturer. He knew very well that in the ten minutes or so at his command the large man could reduce him to a gibbering, maddened idiot, crippled for life and fit only for an insane asylum. A large roll of adhesive tape from another pocket showed that he wouldn't be able to struggle or cry out.

"Well, Slade?" The man pointed to the instruments. "Come on, you know what these are for. Why be difficult?"

Slade pursed his lips and felt a quiver of fear shiver through his stomach. His brain was ice cool as he considered the facts. One, the message was a fake, therefore it was no use to these two. Second, if he proved it to them they would be unlikely to kill. That would be an unnecessary risk for them to take. Third, if he were still alive he might still be able to play a decisive role in the game.

The tape was tight around his wrists and ankles as the large man fastened him securely. It was rough and tight around his mouth and chin, and he knew that he would only be able to whimper slightly at best, and that best would not be enough to attract attention.

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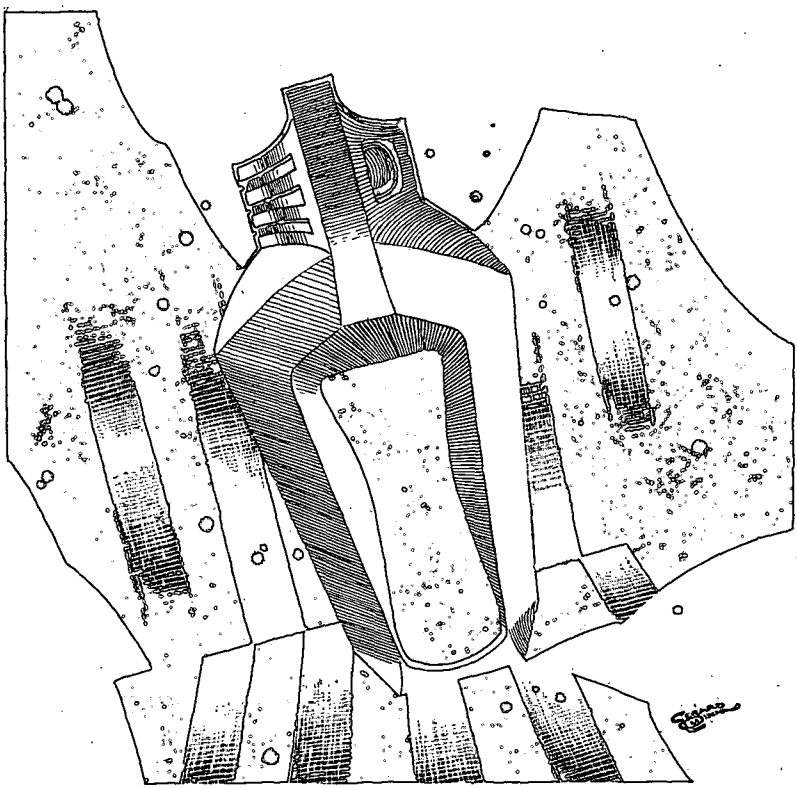

The large man took a tiny knife from the box and held it so that it glinted in the light of the cabin tube.

"You lost one hand, didn't you, Slade? How'd you like to lose the other for a start." He grinned evilly, obviously relishing the position. "Just nod your head and I'll stop. But don't nod too soon, you'll spoil my fun."

Slade looked into the cold, gleaming eyes above the twisted mirthless lips, and knew that he was looking at a man who liked to kill for killing's sake. He struggled hard against a rising panic, striving to substitute logic for fear, and losing the battle all along the line. He felt the first small pain of the knife as it bit into the soft flesh of his forearm, and as he looked down he could see the red, spreading line

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of blood where the knife edge had dug finely into the flesh. With the blood came real fear and his face whitened involuntarily, the sweat of panic springing to his forehead. He nodded quickly.

The man stood up, a thin smile creasing the fullness of his cheeks. "Sensible, Slade. Very sensible. Now, I'm going to take off the gag, and don't try to shout, you'll be dead before you can draw a deep enough breath."

He ripped the tape viciously away from Slade's face and the movement brought a gasp of pain as the adhesive tore cruelly at his flesh.

"All right, let's have it."

"In my top pocket. Piece of paper," Slade gasped.

The man reached into his pocket and fumbled for a minute before bringing out the single, crumpled sheet of paper which bore Stassen's message. He opened it out and read it through slowly, frowning as he did so. When he had finished he looked hard at Slade.

"What are you trying to pull?"

"Nothing. That's the message from Jupiter Stassen, I left the film with him to have it decoded because I wanted to know what was in it. That was his reply."

"You're lying. No Messenger ever lets his assignment out of his sight."

Slade managed to summon a cynical grin which he hoped was convincing. "So you believe that fairy story, do you? You saw me go into the Weeds the other night. I was going to visit Stassen. After all," he shrugged, "a Messenger is human like anyone else, so why shouldn't we try to make a bit on the side if we get the opportunity."

"I didn't see you go into the Weeds?" The man's gaze was stony.

"Well, some one followed me." Slade tucked the information away for future reference. "And someone turned my room upside down while I was out."

The large man nodded slowly in confirmation. "But why? You don't need money—any of you."

"Could you have too much of it," countered Slade. "Don't be a fool. Besides, it isn't every day we get a job where the customer asks us not to use a carrier. It was too good a chance to miss."

"Why didn't he want you to use a carrier?"

"How would I know?" Slade, shrugged again.

"Where's the film now?"

"Stassen kept it."

"Kept it? What for?"

"If it's a fake then it's no good to anyone, so why return it? I can always pick up another roll of microfilm on Sirius Five to take its place."

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There was silence as the man digested the information. He looked at his companion. "What do you think?"

"Could be. We didn't find any film at the hotel, and he could easily have taken a trip to the Weeds that night."

"How'd the message reach you?" the large man asked Slade.

Slade nodded to the newspaper lying folded on the end of the bunk. "In that. You can see the tape that held it."

The smaller of the two flicked the paper open to reveal the ends of transparent tape still stuck to the inside sheet. "Like he says." He held the paper open for inspection.

Somewhere, away down the corridor outside the cabin, there was the sound of the five minute warning bell for all non-travellers to leave the ship. Slade's heart tightened as he heard it, and he could see sudden indecision in the eyes of his torturer. His story was thin, he knew, but there was enough evidence to give it a base of seeming veracity, and he trusted a lot in the shortage of time that his visitors had left to them.

The large man moved suddenly and decisively. He snapped the small case of instruments shut and slid it back into the pocket of his coat.

"Okay, Slade," he said. "You'd better thank your lucky stars you got curious about that film, otherwise no one would have known what was in it—and that would have been too bad for you."

He turned and took the needle gun from his companion, holding it by its slender, deadly barrel. Slade read the intention in his glinting, ugly eyes, but there was nothing he could do to avoid the vicious blow that burned like a white hot iron across his temple, plunging him into instantaneous unconsciousness.

When he came round the cabin was filled with the gentle throbbing of the ship's engines, and through eyes that winced with the pain in his head he could see the brilliant stars marching slowly and majestically across the viewport. His head ached abominably, and there was a large aching bruise at the side of his temple.

The watch on his wrist told him that the ship had been under way about forty minutes, which meant that he had been unconscious almost an hour. It was far too late for him to do anything about his two visitors now, far too late, indeed, to do anything save sit back and wait for the ship to arrive at Sirius Five.

Slade lit a cigarette and lay back on the bunk to think things out. He knew very well that he had been extremely lucky to get away from the last encounter with nothing bigger than a stinging cut around his right arm. The large man with the small box of surgical tools would

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have had very little compunction about killing him had the circumstances been more favourable, but an inter-stellar cruiser was hardly an opportune place to commit murder. That coupled with his own weak story had been enough to swing the balance in his favour, but he knew that such luck was hardly likely to run his way again.

A knock at the door disturbed his train of thought and he wondered fearfully if the two strangers had, after all, made the trip. Logic replaced apprehension, and he realised that it was hardly likely. He sat up and called, "Come in."

The door opened and the tall, lean figure of Archer entered.

Slade eyed him with surprise, and noted, at the same time, the grim, half-humorous smile on the Corps man's face.

"Surprised, eh?" remarked Archer. "How's the head?"

Slade's hand went automatically to the throbbing spot on his temple as his brain took in the implications of Archer's remark.

"I gather you've been here before?"

Archer nodded. "Just after your two boy friends left. I came to see if you were still alive."

Slade gasped at him. "You mean you knew they were here?"

"Sure. My cabin is only just down the corridor. I saw them come and I saw them go—then I came to view the corpse."

"You mean to stand there and tell me that you allowed a couple of hoodlums to work me over, kill me maybe, and you did nothing about it?" Anger flashed in Slade's eyes, making itself evident in his voice and his whole manner.

The smile left Archer's face and he sat down in a chair facing Slade, his face grim and hard.

"Look, Slade," he said. "It's about time you realised that the only use you are to anyone in this game is when you're dead. Sure, I left you to it, because if those boys had left you cold then it would have told me that they'd got what they came after, that would have made it easier for me. I can take a couple of hoods like that and no one will care a damn, but I can't take a Messenger, at least not openly. I'll be frank with you, when I came in here after they'd gone I expected to find you dead. I've had half an hour to think over the fact that you're not, and I can see only two possibilities to explain it. The first is that you gave them what they came for—and that I don't believe. The other is that you bluffed them into thinking you haven't got it any longer."

Slade sat very still, not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he let Archer know how accurate were his guesses.

"Well?" asked Archer softly.

"You're the guy with all the answers, Archer."

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"In other words you won't talk?"

"Right in one."

Archer sighed. "Pity. But I expected it. You'll be glad to know that I had those two apes picked up the moment they left the ship. Just in case they had anything." Archer inspected his fingernails carefully. "We found a slip of paper on the big one, signed by Stassen. He's an old friend of yours, isn't he?"

The tight belt of anger and disappointment knotted Slade's stomach. His last hope that the Corps would be kept in the dark was gone, and he knew that whatever he did from now on would probably find them one jump ahead of him. Added to that was the fact that the principals of the gang represented by the torturer would be none the wiser about the uselessness of their objective because of the arrest of their two representatives by the Corps. They, too, would still be after him.

He shrugged, trying to appear unconcerned. "You knew I'd visited Stassen. Surely you didn't think I went to buy some of his drugs or women? I knew those two apes were after me and I fixed this up as a trick ready for when they should jump on me."

It was a weak attempt, he knew that, but it was all he could think of on the spur of the moment.

Archer shook his head. "It's not good enough, Slade. I didn't know you'd visited Stassen, but I don't credit you with being far seeing enough to arrange a trick like that."

A tight, cold grip of apprehension closed over Slade's heart as Archer spoke. The instant dismissal of the story was lost under the greater importance of his first remark.

"What did you say?" he asked softly.

"I said I didn't credit you—"

"No, no. Before that."

Archer frowned. "I didn't know you visited Stassen."

Slade stabbed a finger in the direction of the Corps man. "But you had me followed from my hotel at Garden City shortly after you visited me?"

Archer gazed at him in surprise. "No, I didn't. Why should I? I knew where you were, and I knew what ship you were leaving on."

Slade got up and began to pace the short stretch of floor beside the bunk, his face grim and puzzled as he pieced together the small items that added up to such a big, important answer.

Archer watched him silently for a long minute, his dark eyes following the quick, excited movements of the other man. "So," understanding glowed on his face and he nodded slowly. "Someone followed you from your hotel to the Weeds, and you thought it was me. Now why should you think that?" He was silent again. Then,

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"Could it be because you found out that it wasn't your two boy friends?" He laughed softly as Slade stopped and turned to look at him. "Yes, I think that's it. And now you've found out that it wasn't me at all. That's what's worrying you is it, Slade? Both your possibilities have faded and you still haven't got the answer."

He rose and made for the door with a slow, deliberate step, a small, grim smile playing around his mouth. "I wonder who it is, Slade? I wonder who the third party in the game can be?" He opened the door. "See you on Sirius Five, perhaps you'll know by then." He was gone, closing the door behind him, and Slade had an even bigger problem to deal with now.

He sat down on the bunk realising all too clearly that he had assumed far too much, and only by the merest chance had he discovered the fallacy of his assumptions. The memory of his first interview with Archer brought with it a reminder of the Corps man's last cryptic remark. He had said that Slade had three enemies, the Corps, the people who had tried to rob him and the Messengers. Obviously, at the time, Archer had credited Slade with knowing more than he actually had done, and now, slowly, the pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle were falling into place. But then—why had Archer named the Messengers as one of his enemies?

VI.

The great golden globe of the planet that was Sirius Five completely filled the viewport of the rocket ferry carrying Slade and the other passengers from the space station to their destination. They were barely two hundred miles above the surface now, and the golden brown of the vast stretches of alien vegetation was clearly visible. Save for one small area, some three hundred square miles in size, the planet had not been taken over by mankind, because of the existence of a semi-civilised, friendly race of aliens who were native to the Terran-sized world. Sirius Five was, in fact, nothing more than a large junction for the great stellar cruisers outward bound from Earth to the stars. The planet possessed nothing that was even remotely of use to the human race, no minerals, no chemical deposits, no precious metals or stones; nothing which could justify its complete conquest by mankind. So, instead, it was just a base where travellers could rest before passing on to more important parts of the Universe.

The planet was the only one circling the star that was habitable to Earthmen. Its atmosphere was mainly nitrogen and oxygen, and therefore breathable; but in all the other seven cases only dead worlds greeted the probing explorations of Terran starships. To all practical intents and purposes Sirius and its system of eight planets was useless.

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During the long trip from Lyros Slade had mapped out a rough plan of campaign. He kept to his cabin as much as possible and avoided Archer entirely. He did not for a moment think that the Corps man would overlook the implications behind Stassen's message that the roll of film was a fake. Archer was too smart a man not to see what that sort of statement meant, and Slade was quite determined to find out who the other Messenger was who was taking the real assignment through to Earth. Either he could warn him of the danger that threatened him or he could help him if he knew already. He wasn't blind to the fact that Archer's greater resources would probably give him a head start, but he hoped that perhaps he could use Archer to lead him in the right direction.

Slade managed to check all the other seventy-three passengers on the cruiser, either through his steward or by rare trips from his cabin to the purser's office, and he was certain that there was no other Messenger on board. There were only three people who had come through from his own starting point, Luther Two, and none of them wore the silver comet badge.

Satisfied on that point Slade relaxed and rested against the time when he could reach Sirius Landing, and that moment was not far away.

The braking jets of the rocket ferry took hold and pressed him back in the foam-rubber seat, while the strain of deceleration made a tight, uncomfortable band around his chest so that it was hard for him to draw breath. The jets roared louder through the vacuum shell of the rocket, a sudden burst of braking power as the ship reached down to the soil beneath. And then they were down. The ferry slowed, hovered, and lowered gently on her hydraulic skids with only a slight grinding thud. The motors cut out and the rockets died, and the sudden silence was broken only by the rustle of moving bodies and the low murmur of voices as the passengers prepared to alight.

Slade pulled himself out of his seat with his good right hand and moved between the seats to the open hatchway. The long ladder of the landing ramp was already in position and the first half a dozen passengers were on their way down. He was about to put his foot on the top step when he felt a hand on his shoulder and Archer's voice asked, casually, "Thought it over, Slade?"

"What?"

"About having too many enemies. If you helped the Corps—well, the Corps might help you in return."

Slade frowned, "I don't follow."

"It's quite simple. You can do what I asked you to before. Let me have that roll of film. I'll be very grateful."

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Surprise showed on Slade's face at Corps man's request. "But it's no good. It's——"

"Yes, I know. It's a fake," interrupted Archer. "Look, Slade, you're into something you know nothing about. Take my advice and get out of it. I'm not convinced you left that film with Stassen, otherwise you'd not be continuing your trip. Oh, I know," he waved away Slade's attempt at interruption, "you're looking for the other Messenger." He laughed gently, derisively. "You're a fool."

Slade's mouth tightened at the contempt in his tone. "Archer," he said. "One thing before we go our separate ways."

"What?"

"If you see any hoods waiting for me, just tip me off, will you?"

Archer laughed outright. "You've got a nerve, Slade. After all the trouble you've given us, you ask us for help." The smile faded and the laughter died. "Frankly, Slade, anything you get you've got coming to you. I told you before that I know your record. I know you've had your finger in some pretty filthy pies—and don't give me that stuff about loyalty to the Messengers. Remember, I know about your visit to Stassen, and if the local Messenger office got to hear about that . . ." He paused grimly. "Just steer clear of me, Slade, because if you don't I won't hesitate to walk all over you." He grinned. "I don't think the Messengers would mind very much if I did—once I showed them that piece of paper and then you turned up without the film."

Abruptly he pushed past and went rapidly down the ramp. Slade watched him bleakly. The fact that Archer didn't believe the film to be a fake registered hard on his mind, but he could see no possible reason for the man's belief. Perhaps he thought Slade was playing a double game to try and throw him off the scent? He shrugged and followed the other slowly

He checked through the Movement Control and the Customs check and deposited his bags at the spaceport hotel where he booked a room. Then he made straight for the local Messenger office to report in. He knew most of the local people there and trusted to that knowledge to get some information that Archer might have difficulty in obtaining. He needed only a few hours start to be able to nullify the Corps man's advantage in organisation and even an hour would be valuable if Archer decided to look for another Messenger.

He turned the corner of the block and could see the looming bulk of the Messenger building some hundred yards down the avenue.

He was a bare twenty yards from the entrance when another man came down the steps and crossed the road diagonally away from the spot on which Slade had halted in sudden surprise. The wide-brimmed

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hat and light-coloured suit that the other wore still did not disguise the tall, slim figure of Ripley, the manager of the Blue Room in Luther City.

Slade watched him pass from sight around another block of buildings while the fact of Ripley's presence at Sirius Landing imprinted itself on his astounded brain. He had dismissed the man from his mind as being merely a nonentity, another pawn in the game whom he managed to pass by and who was lost in the swirl and eddy of past events. And visiting the Messenger office.! Clearly, thought Slade, he had underestimated Mister Ripley. There could be only one reason for his visit to the Messengers, and that was to find out whether Slade had arrived. Had he been ten minutes later Ripley would have had a satisfactory answer.

Slade made his way up to the reception office on the first floor, and the tanned brunette smiled in recognition as soon as he entered.

" Hallo, Bob. Just got in?"

Slade nodded. " On my way Earthside."

" Lucky man. What can I do for you?"

" Check me in and answer a question or two."

He signed the check form and entered brief details of his mission. The girl filed it and noted it in a large ledger.

" Okay," she said. " What are the questions?"

Slade grinned. " I just missed a man I know outside, Rita. I called after him but he didn't hear me. I wonder if you saw him in here? Dark man, light suit, wide hat, name of Ripley."

" Sure. I know him." She nodded. " One of our Travelling Security Branch. Anything wrong, Bob?" She leaned forward anxiously as Slade gripped the edge of the desk with his good right hand. He could feel the scar pulsing red and angry down his cheek.

" No—no. Just a dizzy spell. Guess I'll get a physical before I take the next stage."

" You looked bad there for a minute."

He grinned reassuringly. " I'll be all right. Thanks, Rita. And if Mister Ripley comes in again—"

" He will. He's got an appointment with Mister Campbell at fifteen hundred. Any message?"

Slade shook his head. " No, forget it. I'll catch up with him."

Outside in the fresh air he paused to gather himself. His brain pounded the confusion through his whole being. Ripley, a T.S.B. man, one of the upper echelon of the Messenger Service. Something in his world seemed to have come adrift as the utter insanity of the position was thrust home. And Ripley had an appointment with the local administrator, Roger Campbell, at three—in just two hours' time.

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Slade went slowly back to his hotel and ate a small and unwanted lunch. Afterwards he sat in the bar brooding, and at three exactly he made his way down towards the Messenger office once more, determined to get some sense out of the situation.

The outer office was empty as he entered, but the door leading first to the waiting room and then to Campbell's private room, was standing ajar. Slade went through it cautiously. The waiting room was deserted and silent, but a faint murmur of voices came through the half open door of Campbell's office. Slade paused, uncertain what to do, and as he did so the voices died and there was silence.

Rapidly, Slade crossed the thick pile carpet and paused again outside the door to Campbell's room. Inside all was quiet. He frowned, and then, with sudden decision, stepped silently through.

From a desk on the far side of the office a figure rose to its feet, and the familiar voice of Ripley said, " Good afternoon, Slade. I'm sorry I missed you this morning."

Something heavy thudded solidly on to the back of Slade's head and his world dissolved into a nightmare kaleidoscope of whirling pain and redness, until consciousness slipped mercifully from him.

VII.

Slade lost consciousness in a blur of pain and sickness; he awoke choking and slobbering over a glass of liquid that was being held to his lips. The liquid was ice cold on his lips and tongue but it was white hot and burning as it passed down his throat and into his stomach He retched and coughed, striving to sit up.

The glass vanished from before his hazy, myopic gaze and two hands gripped his shoulders, helping him to a sitting position.

Ripley's voice echoed and boomed in his ears as it said, " That's right. Come on, Slade, sit up. You'll feel better."

Slade blinked the tears from his eyes and rubbing his shaking good hand over his face. He squinted up at the man who stood before him.

" You always manage to be here when I come round. Must be a gift you have," he replied.

Ripley grinned. " Sorry about the coincidence."

" I wish it was just that. I have my doubts."

Slade took another long drink from the glass and sat with eyes closed for a few moments while the liquid did its work.

" Better now?" asked Ripley at last.

" Yeah." Slade nodded and opened his eyes. He looked round the room and realised, not without surprise that it wasn't Campbell's office in the Messenger building. Obviously, he thought, they would take steps to remove him from there.

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Through a wide, uncurtained window daylight flooded into the large well-furnished room. The window was set too high in the wall for him to see out of it and he concentrated on an inspection of the interior. A heavy antique wooden desk stood in one corner, and each wall was surrounded by row upon row of leather-covered books. The whole effect was at once pleasant and archaic. The rest of the furniture consisted of padded chairs and a single large divan on which he had been lying.

" Feel like receiving guests?" asked Ripley.

Slade eyed him speculatively. " Do I have a choice?"

" Not really." Ripley smiled and went out of the room, locking the door behind him.

Slade looked round swiftly. The only door in the room was the one through which Ripley had gone. The window offered no hope at all, for the opaque glass was quite clearly unbreakable. He relaxed and let the tension slip from his muscles. It was not yet time. Tentatively he shook his false hand, and the slight, telltale unbalance, imperceptable to anyone else, told him that the film was still there.

He lay back on the divan.

A few minutes later the door was unlocked and Ripley came in. He was followed by two more men, one of whom Slade recognised at once. The lean, grey-haired figure of Campbell, the agent at Sirius Landing, was well known to him.

The other man was a complete stranger. He was tall, heavily built, with a wide strong face under a mane of white hair. His eyes were wide and intelligent beneath heavy, greying brows. Instinctively Slade realised that he was a personality to be reckoned with. Ripley and Campbell faded into the background, nonentities he could ignore for the time being.

The man pulled a chair closer to the divan on which Slade was seated. Ripley and Campbell flanked him, with Ripley farther away towards the door.

" How do you do, Mister Slade." His voice was deep and sonorous, yet it had a gentle quality about it that was strange compared with the outward strength of the man himself. " My name is Hunter, Martin Hunter. I doubt if you have heard of me." He smiled at a small private joke.

Slade nodded grimly, but said nothing.

" I regret that we meet under such circumstances," Hunter went on. " I had hoped that our first contact would be in happier conditions and some time in the future." He shrugged slightly. " However, fate has ruled otherwise."

Slade felt a rising impatience at the polite platitudes. The niceties of introduction were ludicrous and annoying in the circumstances.

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" You're responsible for the situation," he broke in sharply. " I can think of nothing more likely to ruin a friendship before it has started than a bang on the head with a blunt instrument." He glared angrily at Campbell who had the grace to blush and drop his gaze. At least one score had been pinned correctly.

" I'm afraid I must correct you," replied Hunter. " You, not I, are responsible for the position you are in, unwittingly, I agree. Nevertheless——"

" Look, Hunter," interrupted Slade angrily. " I'm in no mood for polite chit chat. Ripley is a T.S.B. man, and Campbell is a local agent. I presume you are something higher in the Messengers. Just what I've yet to be told, and it would help me a lot to keep my temper if I did."

" A good point," Hunter nodded. " I am something higher. I suppose you might say I am a member of the governing body. Is that enough?"

" It'll do, now—"

" Please, Mister Slade. I, too, have some questions."

" I wonder if I've got the answers."

" I believe you have." Hunter made an arch of his hands with the fingertips level with his eyes and his elbows resting on the arms of his chair. " You accepted a mission on Luther from a man named Smith."

" The local office registered it."

" Quite. But they did not register the fact that Mister Smith gave you instructions to secrete your charge elsewhere but in your carrier. They did realise that you were not using your carrier. I'm afraid that detail has caused us considerable trouble, Slade, trouble which we wish to straighten out at the earliest possible moment."

Tightened muscles sent hair-trigger alarms to Slade's brain. The gaps were too big and too obvious. They knew he didn't use a carrier. How did they know? They didn't know where he had put the film. How did they not know?

" We know also that your mission was to deliver a roll of microfilm somewhere on Earth at midday on September fifteenth. You see, we know the date and we know the time. We do not know where or to whom, neither do we know where the film is at present."

The alarms were stronger now, each word carried a red light with it, and each phrase emphasised a lack of knowledge that was too big to be there at all. If Hunter knew as much as he did why didn't he know the rest of it? Slade sat silent. Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he betray his puzzled alarm.

" Well, Slade?"

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A key clicked in his mind, and somewhere a door opened.

" If it's the film you're after, you're one stop too late. I left it at Garden City."

Hunter smiled, and the smile broadened into a deep appreciative chuckle.

" No, Slade. We know about your deal with Jupiter Stassen and the note with which Archer is trying to blackmail you."

The door slammed shut again.

" You got the film back again before we could intercept it, and once it was in your hands it vanished again." The laughter left his face and the grey eyes were hard and cold. " It is vitally important that we have that piece of film, Slade. It is so important that I must assert my authority as your superior and order you to surrender it."

A dead electric silence spread like a pall over the room as Hunter made his demand. It was broken after a long minute by a tiny, cold chuckle from Slade.

" Remember the edict, Hunter?" he asked mockingly.

" Did you remember it when you went to see Stassen?"

" That was different. I had too many tigers on my tail, and I had to find out why. Stassen was my only hope." He shrugged. "Besides, if you know about the message he sent me you must know as well that the film was a fake. There was nothing in it that made any sense. It can't be of any use to anyone."

" We also know," continued Hunter softly, " that you believe yourself to be a decoy while another Messenger takes care of the real assignment. That is not so, you have my assurance on that point. You are the only Messenger involved, and you are carrying an old-fashioned roll of microfilm that is of Galactic importance." He leaned forward in his chair urgently. " That is why it is essential that you hand it over to us."

An obstinate streak of curiosity kept asking ' Why?' inside Slade's mind. Hunter was in deadly earnest about the importance he attached to the film, but he didn't say why? There was Archer, too. Quite obviously the Galactic Corps were at the opposite end of the scale to the Messengers, and the very fact that the two most powerful forces in the Galaxy were at loggerheads was another indication of the seriousness with which they regarded the whole business.

If he were sensible, Slade supposed, he would hand over the film and say no more about it. Somehow suspicion over ruled sense.

On the desk a phone buzzed mutedly, saving him from the immediate necessity of answering Hunter.

Campbell crossed to it and spoke in a low, inaudible tone. Then he turned to Hunter.

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"You're wanted outside, sir." It was the first time that Slade had heard Hunter's authority respectfully recognised.

Hunter let out a long, deep breath and pursed his lips in frustration, almost as if he realised that the crisis had passed and the initiative had slipped from him. He stood up slowly.

"We will continue this a little later, Slade," he said.

Ripley and Campbell followed him from the room. As the door closed Slade glanced at his watch, it was barely sixteen hundred local time and allowing fifteen minutes for his interview with Hunter, meant that he had been out for roughly three-quarters of an hour. They couldn't have moved him far in that time.

For several minutes he remained seated quietly on the divan. Patience was an under-rated virtue and he knew from experience that many a scheme had been ruined by impetuosity.

At last he moved silently across to the door and listened intently with one ear close to the smooth, cold woodwork. There were no sounds from outside. With his good right hand he tested the door handle, judging its strength and balance. He hoped that the locking mechanism was a part of the ordinary latch, as was normally the case, and the immobility of the handle confirmed his hope.

He tapped firmly with his iron fist on the handle and then listened for some reaction from the other side. There was none, and the heavy metal hand crashed down again on the lock handle, more strongly this time. It shivered but did not break. The crashing sound of the hammer blows echoed through the room as he pounded more heavily at the lock, and he expected at each blow that someone would hear and investigate.

Perspiration stood out on his brow and he gritted his teeth in one last furious two-handed onslaught. The shock ran in white hot waves of pain up the stump of his arm and across his shoulders. The lock handle thudded to the floor.

Slade relaxed and wiped his streaming face.

The broken stump of the lock was just visible in the round spindle-hold and he probed gently at it with a pen which was lying on the desk. It moved easily and there was a thud as the handle on the far side hit the floor. Two hard kicks with the heel of his boot and the remainder of the lock was in ruins. The handle of the pen in the spindle hole enabled him to lever the door open and he found himself in another, smaller room.

The second door on the other side of the room was unlocked and it opened out into a wide corridor. It was deserted, and Slade hesitated uncertain which way to turn. He tossed a mental coin and turned

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right, moving rapidly and silently around a wide curve. Almost before he realised it the corridor opened on to a wide gallery above a large hall. To the right a flight of stairs, heavily carpeted curved down to the floor beneath. He slid hurriedly behind a thick marble collonnade and listened. Below all was quiet. Swiftly and silently he moved down the stairs crouching and on the alert for the sudden appearance of any person. He halted at the bottom, eyes wandering carefully over the wide polished expanse of the hall. Three doors were visible from where he stood and all were closed. A fourth to his left was glass panelled and through it daylight and green leaves were visible.

Green leaves !

Slade's heart turned over sickeningly. There was nothing green on Sirius. There was not one member of the flora of that alien world that was anything but a dirty ochre or a vivid pulsating yellow brown. He looked again, his eyes squinting for details, and he saw a softly moving world of leaves, green leaves that rustled as a soft breeze played among them. Only one place that he knew in the whole Galaxy . . .

All caution fled under a sudden disbelieving terror, and he blundered across the hall his feet clumping and echoing on the polished floor. The door banged open as he pushed at it with unheeding violence, and then he was out in the open standing at the bottom of a short flight of stone steps with sunlight blazing down on him. Before him a hedge rustled, and beyond it a wide green lawn spread with flower-beds stretched away towards a high wire fence.

He lifted his face and saw the sun, a molten ball of glory set in a clear blue sky. And then he knew—he was on Earth.

VIII.

Behind him in the house a door slammed and voices broke the silence. He turned slowly towards the entrance from which he had so recently run. All thought of flight and escape had gone now under a greater, more terrifying need—the need for knowledge. Insanity lay in the terror and bewilderment of his mind. The silent face of his wrist watch with its slow moving dial pointed the way to madness.

Hunter and Ripley came out of the hall at a run and halted at the top of steps as they saw him coming back towards them. Slade halted, too. For a long moment they stood looking at each other before Hunter moved forward to come down the steps. His face was grim and sad as he saw the turmoil in Slade's eyes, and he reached out a hand to Slade's shoulder. Slade hit it away viciously and Hunter winced as the metal fist jarred solidly against the bone of his fore arm.

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" What's the answer, Hunter?" Slade's voice was harsh and shaking. " What am I in the middle of?"

Hunter nodded. " Yes, I am sorry. It has come too soon. But now—yes, you must be told."

He turned back up the steps and Slade followed him, a tall, hunched figure with violent emotion quivering in every muscle of his body, and with the iron fist swinging menacingly at his side. Ripley fell in behind them, his face white and worried, and they went through the hall into one of the ground floor rooms.

Hunter sat down before a wide antique wooden desk, and motioned Slade to another chair beside it. Ripley stayed ostentatiously near the door

The long scar pulsed vividly in the whiteness of Slade's face as he looked across the desk at Hunter.

" All right," he rasped. " Talk, Hunter, and make it good. I'm in a nasty frame of mind right now."

" I'm sorry you should have found us out in such an unsatisfactory manner—"

" I'm in no mood for platitudes. I'm on Earth right now. That's fact number one. An hour ago I was on Sirius Landing being bludgeoned. Fact number two. All I want are explanations."

Hunter nodded. " To a man of your intelligence and capability there must be an obvious solution."

" There are several. You tell me the right one."

" All right." Hunter shrugged in mute resignation. " But I must tell you in my own way so that you will have the entire picture in perspective, and understand the framework on which the Messenger organisation is based." Hunter leaned forward and drew abstract circles with his forefinger on the writing pad before him as he marshalled his thoughts and words.

" To begin with," he said, " the Messengers have been in existence for over two hundred years. They were formed and organised to fill a gap in human knowledge. They were a temporary expedient designed to assist the smooth flow of human expansion and consolidation throughout the Galaxy. They did, and are doing, something which could be done in no other way with the scientific resources at the command of our race. And the gap they filled was the secret of rapid communication."

" I know my history," snapped Slade. " Get to the point."

" About a hundred and thirty years ago," went on Hunter, ignoring the interruption, " in one of our own laboratories a man pressed a switch and sent a piece of metal weighing one gramme from one point to another—a distance of about ten feet. The transfer was instantaneous. We had a matter transmitter on our hands."

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Slade greeted the cold, factual statement with stunned, incredulous silence. Then, in the pause which followed, another piece of the puzzle fell into place and he said softly, " Go on."

"At first we thought of giving it to the Galaxy, of easing the burden that slowed the expansion of our race. But then it was realised that only that slow rate of expansion was preventing man from over-reaching himself. We realised that the matter transmitter might be the key to his ruin rather than his success. We knew, too, that at any time someone else might duplicate our work or develop some other form of communication, and so, over a period of twenty years following the invention the Messengers were re-organised and re-grouped to assume a heavy and vitally important role.

" Every Messenger station has its own secret transmitter and receiver, and every local agent is the keeper of that secret. The Travelling Security Branch was formed from men and women of implicit trust to maintain a Galaxy-wide watch not only on this organisation but also on scientific development everywhere which might threaten our mastery of the Galaxy."

Hunter smiled disarmingly. " Doesn't that tell you why Smith didn't want you to use your carrier? Doesn't it tell you how we knew that you didn't use your carrier for this mission?"

Slade sat very still for a long time while fingers of ice reached down his spine, and the facts slid smoothly into their allotted places.

" Yes," he said at last. Then louder and more surely, " Yes, of course. Each carrier is, in itself, a matter transmitter."

" Right. Everything carried by a Messenger is transmitted at once to a central receiving station where it is examined at leisure. Every secret and every treasure, everything that is important enough for the Messengers to carry, passes through our hands and is—to us—a secret no longer."

Hunter lifted his eyes from an unseeing contemplation of the desk top, and gazed steadily at Slade, his face grim and serious.

" Do you see now, Slade? Do you see what power we have? We are the rulers of the Galaxy, the unseen power that guides the hand of man. Every diplomatic secret between one world and another is known to us long before it is known to those who eventually receive it. Knowing, we can see the folly of it, if folly there is. Knowing, we can act against it as we think best.

" Scientific discovery, too, is beneath our control. We can release or suppress new knowledge according to our valuation of its merit. Those that do not fall into our net are ferreted out by the T.S.B. and dealt with as we feel necessary."

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Slade's eyes narrowed as he picked up a detail. "But what about the inventors?"

Hunter looked at the desk. "Sometimes they are amenable to suggestion, and we give them a limited freedom and unlimited wealth in return for silence. In some cases where fanaticism blinds them, they have accidents—officially that is, and we remove them to the isolation of a small and little known planet. We match our methods to suit the case."

"Obviously." There was irony in Slade's voice.

Hunter shrugged. "What would you have us do? We are the one measure of control on the activities of the human race, the one brake on a wheel which threatens to turn faster and faster until it gets out of control and breaks itself upon a rock. We may not be the best form of control, but we are the best that circumstances can provide at the moment."

"What about Mister — ah — Smith?"

"Yes, I was coming to him. About two years ago on the sixth planet of the star 61 Cygni a Terran scientist was working in co-operation with scientists of the dominant race on a communication system that would take the place of radio waves. I'm not familiar with the technical details, but some physical property in the structure of the planet made radio impossible to operate. In the course of his work this man discovered a series of sub-space radiations which make it possible to transmit messages instantaneously across light years of space.

"We approached him as soon as we got to hear about it, and he agreed to give up his work. He is now in our own laboratories, but that's by the way. Before we got to him a copy of his notes vanished in mysterious circumstances, and ever since we have been trying to plug the gap which that disappearance left. Just over a year ago we got a lead that has taken us over almost a hundred light years of space, and which led us eventually to your Mister Smith. We found that he had taken the precaution of sending an agent ahead to Earth to drop hints to the Galactic Council so that they should be forewarned. They took the hints with a pinch of salt, but they played it safe and sent their own man out to investigate and see what truth there was in the agent's story."

"Archer," breathed Slade softly.

Hunter laughed grimly. "In the meantime, Smith had learned a little too much about our organisation, and he knew, too, that we were on his tail. He decided to play a subtle game. He hired a Messenger, passed on the secret—and disappeared. Thanks to Ripley we got on his track just in time. Another week would have been too late. For

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a while after he had booked a Messenger assignment we were happy over the incredible luck which had made him turn to the Messengers. We thought he had done it in sheer ignorance of who was after him. Then within minutes of his leaving you we found that you weren't using your carrier." Hunter smiled. "Probably you can imagine our confusion. We made hasty arrangements to have you drugged and searched, and, of course, we found nothing. By that time Smith had vanished again, and we thought that he might be playing a double game, hiring a Messenger for an unimportant reason and holding the film himself.

"And then Archer appeared on the scene. We don't know for sure but we believe Archer got to Smith just too late and offered him safe passage in a Corps tender to Earth. Smith, however, had passed the film on to you and could do nothing to get it back without coming out into the open again, so—"

"He put Archer on my track." Slade nodded understandingly, his eyes staring vacantly at the carpet between his feet.

"Right."

"Then who were the other people who were after me?"

Hunter laughed. "You mean the two men who broke into your cabin and got away with the strip of paper from Stassen?"

Slade flushed in realisation of the import behind the question. "Yes."

"That was Archer's neat way of trying to smoke you out. He thought that if you got scared enough you'd take up his offer, so he tried to provide the scare as well as the protection. Luckily it didn't work."

Slade's right hand moved tensely over his bent knee. "I just hope I meet Archer once more," he growled.

"There isn't much more to tell you. You can see, now, I hope, how important it is that the piece of film be kept away from the more legitimate forces of law and government. Once instantaneous communication becomes a part of everyday Galactic life our control of the Galaxy is ended. We have undertaken a huge responsibility, but we believe that it is right and for the ultimate good of all mankind."

Slade sat silent for a long time. His mind was too full of whirling thoughts and incredulous speculation to do more than wonder at the vast panorama of power represented by the Messengers. The organisation which he had thought big was, in fact, gigantic. It represented power beyond all his previous appreciation of power—power of which he was a part. He stirred at last. "You said I had learned too soon?"

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Hunter nodded. "Another two or three years and you would have moved up into the T.S. Branch, and then there would have been a gradual indoctrination for you."

There was another long silence. Hunter made no effort to force the pace of Slade's thinking, and it was several minutes before Slade asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Hand over the film."

"But it's no good. Stassen's tame professor reckoned it to be a fake!"

Hunter smiled. "And yet Archer insisted it was the real thing, and he had been in touch with Smith. We'll take a chance on it, and once you've let us have it you can return to Sirius Landing and continue your trip to Earth as if nothing had happened. By the time you get back here it will be near the time for you to complete your assignment, and we shall have only one job left for you to do."

"And that is?"

"We'll tell you in about ten days," smiled Hunter.

Slade nodded slowly. The time for personal action and decision was gone now, and he felt suddenly glad that the responsibility was passing from him, that the weeks of tension and worry were gone. He wasn't on his own any more; he was part of something that was far bigger than the Messenger Service to which he had given his oath. The future of Mankind was part of his task now—and it was so much more important than anything had ever been in his whole life before. The sudden burst of pride that he felt triggered his actions. He held out the false metal fist and reached into the fist of it with his good right hand to press the nail of the third finger. In the back of the fist the small panel slid away to reveal the cavity beneath, and Slade tipped the tiny roll of film out on to the top of the desk.

The soft, green grass of Earth shimmered on either side of the concrete path as Slade left the ferry which had brought him down from the Outer Space station. Ahead of him lay the other gateway to the world.

It was nine days since he had walked into a small, dark cabinet at the Messenger headquarters in Rhodesia, and out of a similar cabinet at the back of Campbell's office at Sirius Landing. The transfer had been so simple that he was hardly aware that it had occurred. There had been a momentary blurring of his senses, but that was all. Now, he had travelled the other way—the long way—the way of the unsuspecting ordinary traveller who endured discomfort in ignorance of the greatness around him.

Slade moved from the sunlight of the space field into the shadow of the reception centre and was checked through the electronic screen-

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ing gate by eagle-eyed Corps men. Their scrutiny of him was quick and searching, but he knew that his arrival on Earth had registered with them and Archer would know of it quite soon. He smiled to himself as he realised how little good the news would do the Corps man. Beyond the gate, on the fringe of the crowd which was waiting to welcome arriving travellers, he could see the tall figure of Ripley smiling at him. They walked towards each other and gripped hands in greeting.

It was so very different, thought Slade, from their previous encounters, and the idea, now, of Ripley being an hotel manager was ludicrous.

" Welcome back," smiled Ripley. " I've got a car waiting outside. I see the hounds are on your tail."

"Good luck to them," Slade grinned in reply. "How are things here?"

" Couldn't be better. The film was the real thing as we hoped. We had it cut and dried in forty-eight hours."

Slade frowned. " Then Stassen——?"

" Oh, Stassen's man was right up to a point," broke in Ripley. " And I mean up to a point quite literally. The code was a fake, but did you ever here of a straight letter-figure code that needed full stops after every few groups?"

" So?"

" Our code experts fell on it right away. Each dot was magnified about ten thousand times and photographed, and there it was, each dot a page of coded manuscript. Once we'd got over that hurdle the rest was easy."

Slade whistled his surprise. " Quite a trick."

" It was—about four hundred years ago. That's the funny part about it. The whole business was so antiquated it just might have come off if we'd not been on our guard for something out of the ordinary." He grinned at Slade. " After all, look how you and your pals in Garden City were taken in."

Slade smiled wryly. " Any idea what that last job is that Hunter mentioned?"

" Can't you guess?"

Slade had thought a lot about it during the last peaceful lap from Sirius to Earth and he had a pretty good idea what was waiting for him.

" Yes, I think so," he replied. " You want me to put the finger on the guy I'm supposed to deliver the film to. Right?"

" In one," smiled Ripley. " Come on, let's get out of here."

Slade's face bore an expression of smug anticipation as he followed Ripley out into the sunlight. He had a date in Cairo in four days' time with Vincent Antoniades—alias Mister Smith.

Lan Wright

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It was the war to end all wars—the fight to preserve the ideals of Democracy ; of poetry, dreams, music, art, and culture. The participants became so specialised in the end, however, that it became difficult to find a poet or an artist or a musician. But dreamers . . . . . ?

DISAPPEARING ACT

By Alfred Bester

Illustrated by QUINN

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This one wasn't the last war or a war to end war. They called it the War for the American Dream. General Carpenter struck that note and sounded it constantly.

There are fighting generals (vital to an army), political generals (vital to an administration), and public relations generals (vital to a war). General Carpenter was a master of public relations. Forthright and and Four-Square, he had ideals as high and as understandable as the mottoes on money. In the mind of America he *was* the army, the administration, the nation's shield and sword and stout right arm. His ideal was the American Dream.

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" We are not fighting for money, for power, or for world domination," General Carpenter announced at the Press Association dinner.

" We are fighting solely for the American Dream," he said to the 937th Congress.

" Our aim is not aggression or the reduction of nations to slavery," he said at the West Point Annual Officers' Dinner.

" We are fighting for the meaning of civilization," he told the San Francisco Pioneers' Club.

" We are struggling for the ideal of civilization; for culture, for poetry, for the Only Things Worth Preserving," he said at the Chicago Wheat Pit Festival.

" This is a war for survival," he said. " We are not fighting for ourselves, but for our dreams; for the Better Things in Life which must not disappear from the face of the earth."

America fought. General Carpenter asked for one hundred million men. The army was given one hundred million men. General Carpenter asked for ten thousand H-Bombs. Ten thousand H-Bombs were delivered and dropped. The enemy also dropped ten thousand H-Bombs and destroyed most of America's cities.

" We must dig in against the hordes of barbarism," General Carpenter said. " Give me a thousand engineers."

One thousand engineers were forthcoming, and a hundred cities were dug and hollowed out beneath the rubble.

" Give me five hundred sanitation experts, three hundred traffic managers, two hundred air-conditioning experts, one hundred city managers, one thousand communication chiefs, seven hundred personnel experts. . . . "

The list of General Carpenter's demand for technical experts was endless. America did not know how to supply them.

" We must become a nation of experts," General Carpenter informed the National Association of American Universities. " Every man and woman must be a specific tool for a specific job, hardened and sharpened by your training and education to win the fight for the American Dream."

" Our Dream," General Carpenter said at the Wall Street Bond Drive Breakfast, " is at one with the gentle Greeks of Athens, with the nobel Romans of . . . er . . . Rome. It is a dream of the Better Things in Life. Of music and art and poetry and culture. Money is only a weapon to be used in the fight for this dream. Ambition is only a ladder to climb to this dream. Ability is only a tool to shape this dream."

Wall Street applauded. General Carpenter asked for one hundred and fifty billion dollars, fifteen hundred ambitious dollar-a-year men,

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three thousand able experts in minerology, petrology, mass production, chemical warfare and air-traffic time study. They were delivered. The country was in high gear. General Carpenter had only to press a button and an expert would be delivered.

In March of A.D. 2112 the war came to a climax and the American Dream was resolved, not on any one of the seven fronts where millions of men were locked in bitter combat, not in any of the staff headquarters or any of the capitals of the warring nations, not in any of the production centres spewing forth arms and supplies, but in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital buried three hundred feet below what had once been St. Albans, New York.

Ward T was something of a mystery at St. Albans. Like any army hospital, St. Albans was organized with specific wards reserved for specific injuries. All right arm amputees were gathered in one ward, all left arm amputees in another. Radiation burns, head injuries, eviscerations, secondary gamma poisonings and so on were each assigned their specific location in the hospital organization. The Army Medical Corps had designated nineteen classes of combat injury which included every possible kind of damage to brain and tissue. These used up letters A to S. What, then, was in Ward T?

No one knew. The doors were double locked. No visitors were permitted to enter. No patients were permitted to leave. Physicians were seen to arrive and depart. Their perplexed expressions stimulated the wildest speculations but revealed nothing. The nurses who ministered to Ward T were questioned eagerly but they were close-mouthed.

There were dribs and drabs of information, unsatisfying and self-contradictory. A charwoman asserted that she had been in to clean up and there had been no one in the ward. Absolutely no one. Just two dozen beds and nothing else. Had the beds been slept in? Yes. They were rumpled, some of them. Were there signs of the ward being in use? Oh, yes. Personal things on the tables and so on. But dusty, kind of. Like they hadn't been used in a long time.

Public opinion decided it was a ghost ward. For spooks only.

But a night orderly reported passing the locked ward and hearing singing from within. What kind of singing? Foreign language, like. What language? The orderly couldn't say. Some of the words sounded like . . . well, like: *Coe dee on us éager tour. . . .*

Public opinion started to run a fever and decided it was an alien ward. For spies only.

St. Albans enlisted the help of the kitchen staff and checked the food trays. Twenty-four trays went in to Ward T three times a day.

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Twenty-four came out. Sometimes the returning trays were emptied. Most times they were untouched.

Public opinion built up pressure and decided that Ward T was a racket. It was an informal club for goldbricks and staff grafters who caroused within. Cow dee on us eager tour indeed !

For gossip, a hospital can put a small town sewing circle to shame with ease, but sick people are easily goaded into passion by trivia. It took just three months for idle speculation to turn into downright fury. In January, 2112, St. Albans was a sound well-run hospital. By March, 2112, St. albans was in a ferment, and the psychological unrest found its way into the official records. The percentage of recoveries fell off. Malingering set in. Petty infractions increased. Mutinies flared. There was a staff shake-up. It did no good. Ward T was inciting the patients to riot. There was another shake-up, and another, and still the unrest fumed.

The news finally reached General Carpenter's desk through official channels.

" In our fight for the American Dream," he said, " we must not ignore those who have already given of themselves. Send me a Hospital Administration expert."

The expert was delivered. He could do nothing to heal St. Albans. General Carpenter read the reports and broke him.

" Pity," said General Carpenter, " is the first ingredient of civilization. Send me a Surgeon General."

A Surgeon General was delivered. He could not break the fury of St. Albans and General Carpenter broke him. But by this time Ward T was being mentioned in the despatches.

" Send me," General Carpenter said, " the expert in charge of Ward T."

St. Albans sent a doctor, Captain Edsel Dimmock. He was a stout young man, already bald, only three years out of medical school but with a fine record as an expert in psycho-therapy. General Carpenter liked experts. He liked Dimmock. Dimmock adored the General as the spokesman for a culture which he had been too specially trained to seek up to now, but which he hoped to enjoy after the war was won.

" Now look here, Dimmock," General Carpenter began. " We're all of us tools, today—hardened and sharpened to do a specific job. You know our motto: A job for everyone and everyone on the job. Somebody's not on the job at Ward T and we've got to kick him out. Now, in the first place what the hell is Ward T ? "

Dimmock stuttered and fumbled. Finally he explained that it was a special ward set up for special combat cases. Shock Cases.

" Then you do have patients in the ward ? "

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" Yes, sir. Ten women and fourteen men."

Carpenter brandished a sheaf of reports. " Says here the St. Albans patients claim nobody's in Ward T."

Dimmock was shocked. That was untrue, he assured the General.

" All right, Dimmock. So you've got your twenty-four crocks in there. Their job's to get well. Your job's to cure them. What the hell's upsetting the hospital about that ? "

" W-Well, sir. Perhaps it's because we keep them locked up."

" You keep Ward T locked ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Why ? "

" To keep the patients in, General Carpenter."

" Keep 'em in ? What d'you mean ? Are they trying to get out ? They violent, or something ? "

"No, sir. Not violent."

" Dimmock, I don't like your attitude. You're acting damned sneaky and evasive. And I'll tell you something else I don't like. That T classification. I checked with a Filing Expert from the Medical Corps and there is no T classification. What the hell are you up to at St. Albans ? "

" W-Well, sir . . . We invented the T classification. It . . . They . . . They're rather special cases, sir. We don't know what to do about them or how to handle them. W-We've been trying to keep it quiet until we've worked out a modus operandi, but it's brand new, General Carpenter. Brand new ! " Here the expert in Dimmock triumphed over discipline. " It's sensational. It'll make medical history, by God ! It's the biggest damned thing ever."

" What is it, Dimmock ? Be specific."

" Well, sir, they're shock cases. Blanked out. Almost catatonic. Very little respiration. Slow pulse. No response."

" I've seen thousands of shock cases like that," Carpenter grunted. " What's so unusual ? "

" Yes, sir. So far it sounds like the standard Q or R classification. But here's something unusual. They don't eat and they don't sleep."

" Never ? "

" Some of them never."

" Then why don't they die ? "

" We don't know. The metabolism cycle's broken, but only on the anabolism side. Catabolism continues. In other words, sir, they're eliminating waste products but they're not taking anything in. They're eliminating fatigue poisons and rebuilding worn tissue, but without sleep. God knows how. It's fantastic."

" That why you've got them locked up ? Mean to say . . . D'you suspect them of stealing food and sleeping somewhere else ? "

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" N-No, sir," Dimmock looked shamefaced. " I don't know how to tell you this, General Carpenter. I . . . We lock them up because of the real mystery. They . . . Well, they disappear."

" They what ? "

" They disappear, sir. Vanish. Right before your eyes."

" The hell you say."

" I do say, sir. They'll be sitting on a bed or standing around. One minute you see them, the next minute you don't. Sometimes there's two dozen in Ward T. Other times none. They disappear and reappear without rhyme or reason. That's why we've got the ward locked, General Carpenter. In the entire history of combat and combat injury there's never been a case like this before. We don't know how to handle it."

" Bring me three of those cases," General Carpenter said.

Nathan Riley ate french toast, eggs benedict ; consumed two quarts of brown ale, smoked a John Drew, belched delicately and arose from the breakfast table. He nodded quietly to Gentleman Jim Corbett, who broke off his conversation with Diamond Jim Brady to intercept him on the way to the cashier's desk.

" Who do you like for the pennant this year, Nat ? " Gentleman Jim enquired.

" The Dodgers," Nathan Riley answered.

" They've got no pitching."

" They've got Snider and Furillo and Campanella. They'll take the pennant this year, Jim. I'll bet they take it earlier than any team ever did. By September 13th. Make a note. See if I'm right."

" You're always right, Nat," Corbett said.

Riley smiled, paid his check, sauntered out into the street and caught a horsecar bound for Madison Square Garden. He got off at the corner of 50th and Eighth Avenue and walked upstairs to a handbook office over a radio repair shop. The bookie glanced at him, produced an envelope and counted out fifteen thousand dollars.

" Rocky Marciano by a TKO over Roland La Starza in the eleventh," he said. " How the hell do you call them so accurate, Nat ? "

" That's the way I make a living," Riley smiled. " Are you making book on the elections ? "

" Eisenhower twelve to five, Stevenson——"

" Never mind Adlai." Riley placed twenty thousand dollars on the counter. " I'm backing Ike. Get this down for me."

He left the handbook office and went to his suite in the Waldorf where a tall, thin young man was waiting for him anxiously.

" Oh, yes," Nathan Riley said. " You're Ford, aren't you ? Harold Ford ? "

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"Henry Ford, Mr. Riley."

"And you need financing for that machine in your bicycle shop. What's it called?"

"I call it an Ipsimobile, Mr. Riley."

"Hmmm. Can't say I like that name. Why not call it an automobile?"

"That's a wonderful suggestion, Mr. Riley. I'll certainly take it."

"I like you, Henry. You're young, eager, adaptable. I believe in your future and I believe in your automobile. I'll invest two hundred thousand dollars in your company."

Riley wrote a cheque and ushered Henry Ford out. He glanced at his watch and suddenly felt impelled to go back and look around for a moment. He entered his bedroom, undressed, put on a grey shirt and grey slacks. Across the pocket of the shirt were large blue letters: U.S.A.H.

He locked the bedroom door and disappeared.

He reappeared in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital in St. Albans, standing alongside his bed which was one of twenty-four lining the walls of a long light steel barracks. Before he could draw another breath, he was seized by three pairs of hands. Before he could struggle he was shot by a pneumatic syringe and poleaxed by $1\frac{1}{2}$ c.c. of sodium thiomarphate.

"We've got one," someone said.

"Hang around," someone else answered. "General Carpenter said he wanted three."

After Marcus Junius Brutus left her bed, Lela Machan clapped her hands. Her slave women entered the chamber and prepared her bath. She bathed, dressed, scented herself and breakfasted on Smyrna figs, Rose oranges and a flagon of Lachryma Christi. Then she smoked a cigarette and ordered her litter.

The gates of her house were crowded as usual by adoring hordes from the Twentieth Legion. Two centurions removed her chair-bearers from the poles of the litter and bore her on their stout shoulders. Lela Machan smiled. A young man in a sapphire-blue cloak thrust through the mob and ran towards her. A knife flashed in his hand. Lela braced herself to meet death bravely.

"Lady!" he cried. "Lady Lela!"

He slashed his left arm with the knife and let the crimson blood stain her robe.

"This blood of mine is the least I have to give you," he cried.

Lela touched his forehead gently.

"Silly boy," she murmured. "Why?"

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"For love of you, my lady."

"You will be admitted tonight at nine," Lela whispered. He stared at her until she laughed. "I promise you. What is your name, pretty boy?"

"Ben Hur."

"Tonight at nine, Ben Hur."

The litter moved on. Outside the forum, Julius Caesar passed in hot argument with Marcus Antonius Antony. When he saw the litter he motioned sharply to the centurions, who stopped at once. Caesar swept back the curtains and stared at Lela, who regarded him languidly. Caesar's face twitched.

"Why?" he asked hoarsely. "I have begged, pleaded, bribed, wept, and all without forgiveness. Why, Lela? Why?"

"Do you remember Boadicea?" Lela murmured.

"Boadicea? Queen of the Britons? Good God, Lela, what can she mean to our love? I did not love Boadicea. I merely defeated her in battle."

"And killed her, Caesar."

"She poisoned herself, Lela."

"She was my mother, Caesar!" Suddenly Lela pointed her finger at Caesar. "Murderer. You will be punished. Beware the Ides of March, Caesar."

Caesar recoiled in horror. The mob of admirers that had gathered around Lela uttered a shout of approval. Amidst a rain of rose petals and violets she continued on her way across the Forum to the Temple of the Vestal Virgins where she abandoned her adoring suitors and entered the sacred temple.

Before the altar she genuflected, intoned a prayer, dropped a pinch of incense on the altar flame and disrobed. She examined her beautiful body reflected in a silver mirror, then experienced a momentary twinge of homesickness. She put on a grey blouse and a grey pair of slacks. across the pocket of the blouse was lettered U.S.A.H.

She smiled once at the altar and disappeared.

She reappeared in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital where she was instantly felled by 1½ c.c. of sodium thiomorphate injected subcutaneously by a pneumatic syringe.

"That's two," somebody said.

"One more to go."

George Hanmer paused dramatically and stared around . . . at the opposition benches, at the Speaker on the woolsack, at the silver mace on a crimson cushion before the Speaker's chair. The entire House of Parliament, hypnotized by Hanmer's fiery oratory, waited breathlessly for him to continue.

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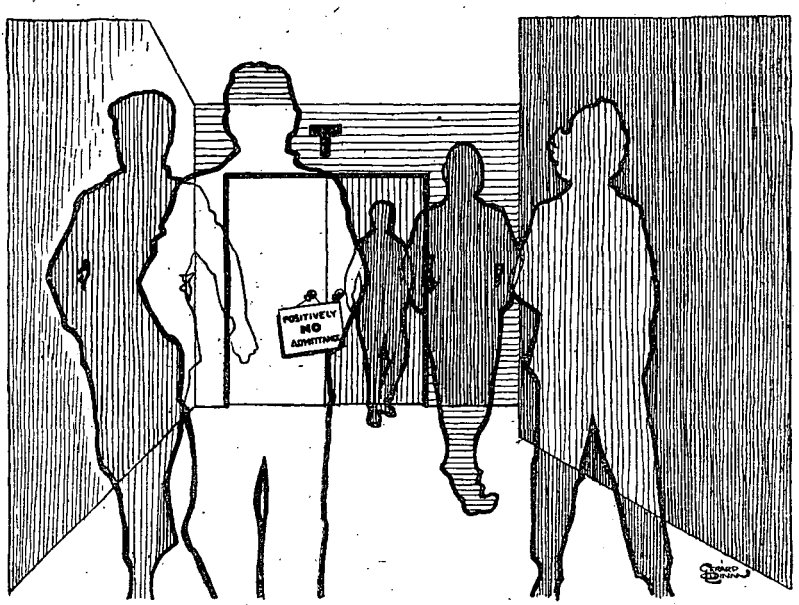

"I can say no more," Hanmer said at last. His voice was choked with emotion. His face was blanched and grim. "I will fight for this bill at the beachheads. I will fight in the cities, the towns, the fields and the hamlets. I will fight for this bill to the death and, God willing, I will fight for it after death. Whether this be a challenge or a prayer, let the consciences of the right honourable gentlemen determine; but of one thing I am sure and determined: England must own the Suez Canal.

Hanmer sat down. The House exploded. Through the cheering and applause he made his way out into the division lobby where Gladstone, Canning, and Peel stopped him to shake his hand. Lord Palmerston eyed him coldly, but Pam was shouldered aside by Disraeli who limped up, all enthusiasm, all admiration.

"We'll have a bite at Tattersall's," Dizzy said. "My car's waiting."

Lady Beaconfield was in the Rolls Royce outside the Houses of Parliament. She pinned a primrose on Dizzy's lapel and patted Hanmer's cheek affectionately.

"You've come a long way from the schoolboy who used to bully Dizzy, Georgie," she said.

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Hanmer laughed. Dizzy sang: "Gaudeamus igitur . . ." and Hanmer chanted the ancient scholastic song until they reached Tattersall's. There Dizzy ordered Guinness and grilled bones while Hanmer went upstairs in the club to change.

For no reason at all he had the impulse to go back for a last look. Perhaps he hated to break with his past completely. He divested himself of his surtout, nankeen waistcoat, pepper and salt trousers, polished Hessians and undergarments. He put on a grey shirt and grey trousers and disappeared.

He reappeared in Ward T of the St. Albans hospital where he was rendered unconscious by 1½ c.c. of sodium thiomorphate.

"That's three," somebody said.

"Take 'em to Carpenter."

So there they sat in General Carpenter's office, PFC Nathan Riley, M/Sgt. Lela Machan, and Corp/2 George Hanmer. They were in their hospital greys. They were torpid with sodium thiomorphate.

The office had been cleared and it blazed with blinding light. Present were experts from Espionage, Counter-Espionage, Security and Central Intelligence. When Captain Edsel Dimmock saw the steel-faced ruthless squad waiting the patients and himself, he started. General Carpenter smiled grimly.

"Didn't occur to you that we mightn't buy your disappearance story, eh, Dimmock?"

"S-Sir?"

"I'm an expert too, Dimmock. I'll spell it out for you. The war's going badly. Very badly. There've been intelligence leaks. The St. Albans mess might point to you."

"B-But they do disappear, sir. I——"

"My experts want to talk to you and your patients about this disappearing act, Dimmock. They'll start with you."

The experts worked over Dimmock with preconscious softeners, id releases and super-ego blocks. They tried every truth serum in the books and every form of physical and mental pressure. They brought Dimmock, squealing, to the breaking point three times, but there was nothing to break.

"Let him stew for now," Carpenter said. "Get on to the patients."

The experts appeared reluctant to apply pressure to the sick men and the woman.

"For God's sake, don't be squeamish," Carpenter raged. "We're fighting a war for civilization. We've got to protect our ideals no matter what the price. Get to it!"

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The experts from Espionage, Counter-Espionage, Security and Central Intelligence got to it. They awakened the patients with adrenalin. Like three candles, PFC Nathan Riley, M/Sgt. Lela Machan and Corp/2 George Hanmer snuffed out and disappeared. One moment they were seated in chairs surrounded by violence. The next moment they were not.

The experts gasped. General Carpenter did the handsome thing. He stalked to Dimmock. "Captain Dimmock, I apologize. Colonel Dimmock, you've been promoted for making an important discovery . . . only what the hell does it mean? We've got to check ourselves first."

Carpenter snapped up the intercom. "Get me a combat-shock expert and an alienist."

The two experts entered and were briefed. They examined the witnesses. They considered.

"You're all suffering from a mild case of shock," the combat-shock expert said. "War jitters."

"You mean we didn't see them disappear?"

The shock expert shook his head and glanced at the alienist who also shook his head.

"Mass illusion," the alienist said.

At that moment PFC Riley, M/Sgt. Machan and Corp/2 Hanmer reappeared. One moment they were a mass illusion; the next, they were back sitting in their chairs surrounded by confusion.

"Dope 'em again, Dimmock," Carpenter cried. "Give 'em a gallon." He snapped up his intercom. "I want every expert we've got. Emergency meeting in my office at once."

Thirty-seven experts, hardened and sharpened tools all, inspected the unconscious shock cases and discussed them for three hours. Certain facts were obvious: This must be a new fantastic syndrome brought on by the new and fantastic horrors of the war. As combat technique develops, the response of victims of this technique must also take new roads. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Agreed.

This new syndrome must involve some aspects of teleportation . . . the power of mind over space. Evidently combat shock, while destroying certain known powers of the mind must develop other latent powers hitherto unknown. Agreed.

Obviously, the patients must only be able to return to the point of departure, otherwise they would not continue to return to Ward T nor would they have returned to General Carpenter's office. Agreed.

Obviously, the patients must be able to procure food and sleep wherever they go, since neither was required in Ward T. Agreed.

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"One small point," Colonel Dimmock said. "They seem to be returning to Ward T less frequently. In the beginning they would come and go every day or so. Now most of them stay away for weeks and hardly ever return."

"Never mind that," Carpenter said. "Where do they go?"

"Do they teleport behind the enemy lines?" someone asked. "There's those intelligence leaks."

"I want Intelligence to check," Carpenter snapped. "Is the enemy having similar difficulties with, say, prisoners of war who appear and disappear from their P.O.W. camps? They might be some of ours from Ward T."

"They might simply be going home," Colonel Dimmock suggested.

"I want Security to check," Carpenter ordered. "Cover the home life and associations of every one of those twenty-four disappearers. Now . . . about our operations in Ward T. Colonel Dimmock has a plan."

"We'll set up six extra beds in Ward T," Edsel Dimmock explained. "We'll send in six experts to live there and observe. Information must be picked up indirectly from the patients. They're catatonic and non-responsive when conscious, and incapable of answering questions when drugged."

"Gentlemen," Carpenter summed it up. "This is the greatest potential weapon in the history of warfare. I don't have to tell you what it can mean to us to be able to teleport an entire army behind enemy lines. We can win the war for the American Dream in one day if we can win this secret hidden in those shattered minds. We must win!"

The experts hustled, Security checked, Intelligence probed. Six hardened and sharpened tools moved into Ward T in St. Albans Hospital and slowly got acquainted with the disappearing patients who appeared and departed less and less frequently. The tension increased.

Security was able to report that not one case of strange appearance had taken place in America in the past year. Intelligence reported that the enemy did not seem to be having similar difficulties with their own shock cases or with P.O.W.'s.

Carpenter fretted. "This is all brand new. We've got no specialists to handle it. We've got to develop new tools." He snapped up his intercom. "Get me a college," he said.

They got him Yale.

"I want some experts in mind over matter. Develop them," Carpenter ordered. Yale at once introduced three graduate courses in Thaumaturgy, Extra-Sensory Perception and Telekinesis.

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The first break came when one of the Ward T experts requested the assistance of another expert. He wanted a Lapidary.

"What the hell for?" Carpenter wanted to know.

"He picked up a reference to a gem stone," Colonel Dimmock explained. "He's a personnel specialist. He can't relate it to anything in his experience."

"And he's not supposed to," Carpenter said approvingly. "A job for every man and every man on the job." He flipped up the intercom. "Get me a Lapidary."

An expert Lapidary was given leave of absence from the army arsenal and asked to identify a type of diamond called Jim Brady. He could not.

"We'll try it from another angle," Carpenter said. He snapped up his intercom. "Get me a Semanticist."

The Semanticist left his desk in the War Propaganda Department but could make nothing of the words Jim Brady. They were names to him. No more. He suggested a Genealogist.

A Genealogist was given one day's leave from his post with the Un-American Ancestors Committee but could make nothing of the name Brady beyond the fact that it had been a common name in America for five hundred years. He suggested an Archaeologist.

An Archaeologist was released from the Cartography Division of Invasion Command and instantly identified the name Diamond Jim Brady. It was a historic personage who had been famous in the city of Little Old New York some time between Governor Peter Stuyvesant and Governor Fiorello La Guardia.

"Christ!" Carpenter marvelled. "That's centuries ago. Where the hell did Nathan Riley get that? You'd better join the experts in Ward T and follow this up."

The Archaeologist followed it up, checked his references and sent in his report. Carpenter read it and was stunned. He called an emergency meeting of his staff of experts.

"Gentleman," he announced, "Ward T is something bigger than teleportation. Those shock patients are doing something far more incredible . . . far more meaningful. Gentlemen, they're travelling through time!"

The staff rustled uncertainly. Carpenter nodded emphatically.

"Yes, gentlemen. Time travel is here. It has not arrived the way we expected it . . . as a result of expert research by qualified specialists; it has come as a plague . . . an infection . . . a disease of the war . . . a result of combat injury to ordinary men. Before I continue, look through these reports for documentation."

The staff read the stencilled sheets. PFC Nathan Riley . . . disappearing into the early twentieth century in New York; M/Sgt. Lela

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Machan . . . visiting the first century in Rome; Corp /2 George Hanmer . . . journeying into the nineteenth century in England. And all the rest of the twenty-four patients, escaping the turmoil and horrors of modern war in the twenty-second century by fleeing to Venice and the Doges, to Jamaica and the buccaneers, to China and the Han Dynasty, to Norway and Eric the Red, to any place and any time in the world.

"I needn't point out the colossal significance of this discovery," General Carpenter pointed out. "Think what it would mean to the war if we could send an army back in time a week or a month or a year. We could win the war before it started. We could protect our Dream—poetry and beauty and the fine culture of America—from barbarism without ever endangering it."

The staff tried to grapple with the problem of winning battles before they started.

"The situation is complicated by the fact that these men and women of Ward T are non compos. They may or may not know how they do what they do, but in any case they're incapable of communicating with the experts who could reduce this miracle to method. It's for us to find the key. They can't help us."

The hardened and sharpened specialists looked around uncertainly.

"We'll need experts," General Carpenter said.

The staff relaxed. They were on familiar ground again.

"We'll need a Cerebral Mechanist, a Cybernetic ist, a Psychiatrist, an Anatomist, an Archaeologist and a first rate Historian. They'll go into that ward and they won't come out until their job is done. They must get the technique of time travel."

The first five experts were easy to draft away from other war departments. All America was a tool chest of hardened and sharpened specialists. But there was trouble locating a first-class historian until the Federal Penitentiary co-operated with the army and released Dr. Bradley Scrim from his twenty years at hard labour. Dr. Scrim was acid and jagged. He had held the chair of Philosophic History at a Western university until he spoke his mind about the war for the American Dream. That got him twenty years hard.

Scrim was still intransigent, but induced to play ball by the intriguing problem of Ward T.

"But I'm not an expert," he snapped. "In this benighted nation of experts, I'm the last singing grasshopper in the ant heap."

Carpenter snapped up the intercom. "Get me an Entomologist," he said.

"Don't bother," Scrim said. "I'll translate. You're a nest of ants—all working and toiling and specializing. For what?"

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"To preserve the American Dream," Carpenter answered hotly. "We're fighting for poetry and culture and education and the Finer Things in Life."

"You're fighting to preserve me," Scrim said. "That's what I've devoted my life to. And what do you do with me? Put me in jail."

"You were convicted of enemy sympathizing and fellow-travelling," Carpenter said.

"I was convicted of having a mind of my own," Scrim answered.

Scrim was also intransigent in Ward T. He stayed one night, enjoyed three good meals, read the reports, threw them down and began hollering to be let out.

"There's a job for everyone and everyone must be on the job," Colonel Dimmock told him. "You don't come out until you've got the secret of time travel."

"There's no secret I can get," Scrim said.

"Do they travel in time?"

"Yes and no."

"The answer has to be one or the other. Not both. You're evading the——"

"Look," Scrim interrupted wearily. "What are you an expert in?"

"Psycho-therapy."

"Then how the hell can you understand what I'm talking about? This is a philosophic concept. I tell you there's no secret here that the army can use. There's no secret any group can use. It's a secret for individuals only."

"I don't understand you."

"I didn't think you would. Take me to Carpenter."

They took Scrim to Carpenter's office where he grinned at the general malignantly, looking for all the world like a red-headed, underfed devil.

"I'll need ten minutes," Scrim said. "Can you spare them out of your tool box?"

Carpenter nodded.

"Now listen carefully. I'm going to give you all the clues to something vast, so strange, so new, that it will need all your fine edge to cut into it."

Carpenter looked expectant.

"Nathan Riley goes back in time to the early twentieth century. There he lives the life of his fondest dreams. He's a big-time gambler, the friend of Diamond Jim Brady and others. He wins money betting on events because he always knows the outcome in advance. He won money betting on Eisenhower to win an election. He won money betting on a prize fighter named Marciano to beat another prize fighter

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named La Starza. He made money investing in an automobile company started by Henry Ford. There are the clues. They mean anything to you ? "

" Not without a Sociological Analyst," Carpenter answered. He reached for the intercom.

" Wait. I'll explain. Let's try some more clues. Lela Machan, for example. She escapes into the Roman empire where she lives the life of her dreams as a *femme fatale*. Every man loves her. Julius Caesar, Brutus, the entire Twentieth Legion, a man named Ben Hur. Do you see the fallacy ? "

" No."

" She also smokes cigarettes."

" Well ? " Carpenter asked after a pause.

" I continue," Scrim said. " George Hanmer escapes into England of the nineteenth century where he's a member of parliament and the friend of Gladstone, Canning and Disraeli, who takes him riding in his Rolls Royce. Do you know what a Rolls Royce is ? "

" No."

" It was the name of an automobile."

" So ? "

" You don't understand yet ? "

" No."

Scrim paced the floor in exaltation. " Carpenter, this is a bigger discovery than teleportation or time travel. This can be the salvation of man. I don't think I'm exaggerating. Those two dozen victims in Ward T have been H-Bombed into something so gigantic that it's no wonder your specialists and experts can't understand it."

" What the hell's bigger than time travel, Scrim ? "

" Listen to this, Carpenter. Eisenhower did not run for office until the middle of the twentieth century. Nathan Riley could not have been a friend of Diamond Jim Brady's and bet on Eisenhower to win an election—not simultaneously. Brady was dead a quarter of a century before Ike was President. Marciano defeated La Starza fifty years after Henry Ford started his automobile company. Nathan Riley's time travelling is full of similar anachronisms."

Carpenter looked puzzled.

" Lela Machan could not have had Ben Hur for a lover. Ben Hur never existed in Rome. He never existed at all. He was a character in a novel. She couldn't have smoked. They didn't have tobacco then. You see ? More anachronisms. Disraeli could never have taken George Hanmer for a ride in a Rolls Royce because automobiles weren't invented until long after Disraeli's death."

" The hell you say," Carpenter exclaimed. " You mean they're all lying ? "

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"No. Don't forget, they don't need sleep. They don't need food. They're not lying. They're going back in time all right. They're eating and sleeping back there."

"But you just said their stories don't stand up. They're full of anachronisms."

"Because they travel back into a time of their own imagination. Nathan Riley has his own picture of what America was like in the early twentieth century. It's faulty and anachronistic because he's no scholar; but it's real for him. He can live there. The same is true for the others."

Carpenter goggled.

"The concept is almost beyond understanding. These people have discovered how to turn dreams into reality. They know how to enter their dream realities. They can stay there, live there, perhaps forever. My God, Carpenter, this is your American dream. It's miracle-working, immortality, Godlike creation, mind over matter. It must be explored. It must be studied. It must be given to the world."

"Can you do it, Scrim?"

"No, I cannot. I'm a historian. I'm non-creative, so it's beyond me. You need a poet . . . a man who understands the creation of dreams. From creating dreams on paper it oughtn't to be too difficult to take the step to creating dreams in actuality."

"A poet? Are you serious?"

"Certainly, I'm serious. Don't you know what a poet is? You've been telling us for five years that this war is being fought to save the poets."

"Don't be facetious, Scrim. I——"

"Send a poet into Ward T. He'll learn how they do it. He's the only man who can. A poet is half doing it, anyway. Once he learns, he can teach us; but the poet is the only man who can interpret between those shock cases and your experts."

"I believe you're right, Scrim."

"Then don't delay, Carpenter. Those patients are returning to this world less and less frequently. We've got to get at that secret before they disappear for ever. Send a poet to Ward T."

Carpenter snapped up his intercom. "Send me a poet," he said.

He waited, and waited . . . and waited . . . while America sorted feverishly through its two hundred and ninety millions of hardened and sharpened experts, its specialized tools to defend the American Dream of beauty and poetry and the Better Things in Life. He waited for them to find a poet, not understanding the endless delay, the fruitless search; not understanding why Bradley Scrim laughed and laughed at this final, fatal disappearance.

Alfred Bester

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One method of sending colonial emigrants across interstellar distances by spaceship would be to place them in suspended animation until journey's end. The ship, however, despite its foolproof machinery, would need a Guardian, a Caretaker — and if he should get illusions . . . . . ?

INTO THY HANDS

By E. C. Tubb

Illustrated by LEWIS

God walked in his garden and smiled as he found all well with his world.

He wasn't really God, of course, though when a man has the ultimate power of life and death he tends to become something a little more than human. And, though a good case could be made out for calling any self-enclosed system a 'world', yet the concept doesn't fit the generally accepted meaning of the word. But there could be no doubt at all that the garden was really a garden.

Sam Decker whistled softly to himself as he walked through the humid compartment, pausing from time to time to lop an arrogant leaf or to clip a browning frond. The plants seemed to revel in their job of converting the unwanted carbon dioxide in the air into usable oxygen and the lush growths were inordinately healthy. He tilted his head a little as he surveyed the neat rows, carefully trimmed a ragged edge into exact alignment, then nodded with final satisfaction.

"You're doing well," he told the plants kindly. "I trust that none of you will let me down?"

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They didn't answer him, they never did, but as he stared at their long green faces he knew that they would do their best to serve him and his world. But sometimes he wished that things didn't run so smoothly.

Dutifully he checked the chemical composition of the nutrient vats, examined the thermostats and looked thoughtfully at the intensity meter of the sun-lamps. He did it as he had done it a thousand times before, as he might do it a thousand times again and, as always, the examination was unnecessary. The garden, like the rest of the world,

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functioned as it had been designed to function, smoothly, perfectly, mechanically capable of doing its job without outside interference from anyone.

Especially from the resident God.

Not that he consciously thought of himself as God but when a man is the only living, conscious thing in an entire world, then it doesn't take much to give him delusions of grandeur. And he was a God. He held the literal power of life and death. He had the power to destroy his world, to turn the smoothly operating machines into broken ruin. He held the power of destiny—and if that doesn't make a man a God, then what does?

He chuckled as he thought about it, his mind engrossed with the logic of deity as he walked softly down the silent corridors of his world, automatically checking dials and instruments, gauges and meters, watching and checking but never, never tampering. There was no need to tamper. The ship was running on its smooth, pre-determined path and, unless chaos threatened, there was no need for him to do anything at all.

Which was perhaps the hardest part of being God.

He had read all the contents of the library. He had read the service manuals, the log books, the instructional data on the controls and he had even read the makers' names on the dial faces. He had read every printed or handwritten word in his world and he had wrung that source dry. He had studied and lost interest only to study again until silence and boredom had driven him from his cubicle to wander through the silent places. If the library had been bigger, or if there had been voice recordings or video-tapes, it wouldn't have been so bad, but space had determined the choice of books and texts and instructionals soon pall. So he had checked every instrument a thousand times, passed through the inevitable stages of irritation, fear, regret, nostalgia and anger, finally to achieve a compromise with the loneliness and silence.

"Am I God?" He asked the question aloud, habit forming the thought into words so that they broke the eternal silence, whispering as they faded and merged with the soft, almost inaudible sigh of the machines. No answer. Nothing but the faint hum of whirling blades as fans spun on bearings that had lasted a hundred years and would last as long again.

"I am God!"

Silence, no denial, merely a mechanical drone as if the humped machines had whispered their agreement to the shouted boast. He listened to his dying words as they bounced from bulkheads and floor plates finally to die in formless echoes that became one with the life-sound of his world.

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"You're a fool," he said dispassionately, then, because there is a simple way to overcome silence and lack of company, immediately answered himself.

"Why am I a fool? I can do anything I want to do and no one could stop me."

"So what?"

"So you've got no right to call me a fool."

"If you weren't a fool you wouldn't be here. Right?"

"Right."

As usual he agreed with himself and then felt angry at losing the argument. It was a crazy thing to do, this talking to himself, but it helped to beat the silence and the crushing loneliness, and he had fallen into the habit so imperceptibly that he no longer worried about it.

"There should have been two," he muttered. "This tomb's getting beyond a joke." But two would have been incompatible and, cooped up as they were, they would have snarled and fought, sulked and argued, gossiped and forgotten who they were and what was their purpose. Three would have solved the problem, but three men would have needed too much air, water and food. And there was an even more important reason why there could not be three, almost as important as why there could not be a mixed pair.

Thinking about it made him miserable and he went to look at his worshippers.

They rested in splendid isolation, all three hundred and ninety-nine of them, two hundred women and the rest men. They didn't really worship him, of course, but they didn't not-worship him either, and they were utterly dependent on him for their lives, their happiness, their hope of a future. They waited in silent immobility awaiting the day of resurrection and his was the hand which could send them into a deeper final oblivion or wake them to the warmth and light and comfort of his safe, snug world.

Could any God have more power than that?

He smiled as he strode through the droning corridors, dutifully checking each instrument as he passed, and finally came to the thick doors of the deep-freeze. Within it was cold, almost dank despite the brilliant lights and gleaming metal and he shivered a little as he stared at the ranked gauges and flickering needles of a multitude of dials.

Number eleven? He frowned as he stared at the sealed hatch and a dim vision stirred and walked like an ill-remembered dream. A girl, tall, with hair as fine as silk and as golden as freshly harvested corn. A supple girl with a wide mouth and merry, laughing eyes. He sighed and sadness gripped him as he thought of her. Was it yesterday?

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Hardly, but was it a year ago? A hundred years? It made no difference, both were the same when a century could be a second, while a year could be an eternity. But he could change that. He could arouse her, fill her frozen lungs with air, hear her voice and watch her smile and even take her upstairs where both could. . . .

He shook his head. No. Company would spoil that last pleasure and the company of a woman would ruin it for all time. And besides, now that he thought about it, he didn't care too much for blondes. No. Number eleven should wait in chilly silence until some other day. He moved down the row of hatches.

Number fifty-two? Dark hair and a small but virile body. Red lips and a kissable mouth, sleek limbs and an ivory skin. Or was it? Did number fifty-two contain that type of girl or did it contain someone different? Or, worse still, did it contain something no longer even remotely human? Panic sent him running back to the bank of dials and air hissed from between his teeth as he stared at the slender needles. She, whoever it was, still lived, the electronic detectors registered the tiny difference between scientific and actual death with mechanical efficiency.

He was surprised to find sweat on his brow, the clammy sweat of fear, and his heart pounded to the shock of utter relief. Strange that he should be affected so? Strange that God should worry about a single worshipper, or not-unworshipper as the case may be.

But, now that he came to think about it, the whole thing had been a mistake. He wanted no woman to share his world for women were realists and he had long left reality behind him. A man perhaps? There was something about the affinity of minds only to be found with a friend, which transcended all earthly desires.

Number twenty-two perhaps? But twenty-two had a red tab on the seal and beside that he couldn't remember who rested within the tiny compartment. Two-eighty? Another red tab. Two-ninety-five? Had that been Dave? Big and cheerful with a fund of small talk and a store of jokes tailor-made to suit any company. Was it Dave? He couldn't remember and anyway, the hatch had a red tab. Three-ten? That had no warning signal and he remembered who waited inside. Three-ten would be Nat, cynical, arrogant, something after the style of the old-fashioned Junker. Bull-headed and supremely confident of himself. Always impatient. Always a little contemptuous. Too inclined to use force instead of subtlety. It would be a good joke to arouse Nat, he had never really liked the man.

He hesitated with his fingers on the controls which would stir the frozen clay to virile life. Somehow, between conception and execution, he had lost the desire to arouse the man and slowly his hand fell to his

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side. No. The world wasn't big enough to share and he could do without the living company awaiting his command. While they rested in their frozen oblivion they were his to rule, to do with as he saw fit, to kill, to save, to dispose of as he wished. Awake they would be out of his power and he was a jealous if a lonely God.

He sighed and moved away, his eyes flickering as he passed dials and gauges, tell-tales and signal lamps. Flickering as they always flickered, watching, half-hopefully, half-fearfully, as though he was afraid of what he might see. Inevitably he made his way to the garden, the only spot where he felt really comfortable now that the deep-freeze irritated him so and the control room held such strange but disturbing power.

The sawgrass was as usual. Almost sensuous in its thick, lush greenness, too reminiscent of dimly remembered fields and pastures for comfort, and yet, because of that resemblance, calming and warm with memories of what he had once been.

"You green devils," he said fondly. "You're all right, aren't you? You've got company, wives perhaps, children, plenty of food and artificial sunlight. You've got everything easy, too easy, damn you! A little suffering might do you good!"

He stooped and squinted at the thermostats. A twist, here. An increase in the sun-lamp intensity, and the growths would wilt and wither as if blasted by a tropical sun. They would brown and sag, lose their healthy greenness, rot and fade in vegetable misery. By so doing he would prove his power. He would have mastered them and, if he so wished, could restore them to their former glory. *If* he wished.

And he did wish! Hate had replaced his former calm and the sight of the long faces of the healthy plants had triggered something bestial and spiteful within him. It would be so easy. A slight adjustment and . . . He smiled and reached for the controls.

Somehow he couldn't do it. Somehow his fingers refused to grip the knurled verniers and sweat oozed from his forehead as he tried to force his hands to obey his mental commands. For a long minute he tried. For what seemed an eternity he struggled with himself to ruin the garden, and, as he struggled, hate blossomed like an ugly flower in his brain. It was *his* garden. It was *his* world. He *was* God.

And yet he couldn't do it.

"You swine," he sobbed as he straightened and glared at the plants. "That's right, laugh at me, damn you! Sit there and grin and suck in your damn poison and breath out your damn gas. But you haven't beaten me, you know. I can still cut you down, rip out your roots, smash you beneath my feet. I can . . ."

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He sagged as he finally admitted his defeat and his words echoed into an emptiness as great as the threat they contained. For he couldn't do it.

"Damn you," he said bitterly. "Why can't you speak to me? Why don't you answer?"

Silence, the eternal, softly droning silence that was worse than an utter absence of sound. Even his footsteps sounded too loud, echoing like a shouted insult in the sanctity of a cathedral, and he trod gently as if he were an interloper instead of God. He sighed again, then, as he remembered the only thing now left to him, he smiled and moved with haughty pride towards the steps leading to his personal heaven.

It was a thing of which he could never tire and, standing beneath the transparent dome of the control room, he felt again the supreme conviction that he was no ordinary man. He took a deep breath, held it until the blood throbbed in his ears then, releasing it in a long, hissing exhalation, lifted his eyes to the glory which lay all about him.

Stars! A million million stars. They blazed against the ebony backdrop of space with such incredible brilliance that they seemed to illuminate the very void. They hung against the velvet dark like glittering droplets caught in the web of some cosmic spider and, as he stared at them, his throat tightened with the supreme beauty of what he saw.

Nebulae hung like curtains of shimmering crystal, like thin clouds of star-mist, as tenuous as a vanishing dream and as fine as the wind-blown silk of a woman's hair. Globular clusters glowed like a swarm of bees and the distant spirals of island universes shone with a mystic clarity. The thick tracery of the Milky Way made a bridge of diamond splendour against which the sombre patches of interstellar dust-clouds showed like spilled ink against snowy linen, dark warnings against a sea of light.

And with the stars came the awful majesty of incredible distances, the tremendous sense of challenge met and accepted, the impossible vastness of what lay beyond. He stared at them, tilting his head to face the glittering flecks, and imagination converted them to alien eyes staring down with cold hostility at what encroached into their midst. Hard, he thought them, somehow mocking in their remoteness and within him elation at his own power filled him with an emotion so intense that his eyes stung and his voice trembled.

"We're coming," he cried. "We're heading straight towards you! Who will give us welcome?"

They ignored him. They shone as they had shone for countless millenia, aloof and indifferent, wrapped in distance and the imponderable silence of the void.

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Staring at them he felt again the impression that he and his world were invaders, the carriers of some strange disease, malignant bacteria plunging into the heart of some vast and incomprehensible organism. Like bacteria they knew nothing of the Greater Plan but, equally like bacteria, they were ready to conquer and spread, to touch those stars with the curse of life and to rob them of their sterile brilliance.

Beneath his feet the smoothly functioning mechanism of the ship sent faint vibrations through the metal, throbbing against his feet as if it were the very pulse of impatient life itself. Around him, scattered like a miniature heaven, the signal lights of the control panel winked and blinked like a thousand watching eyes of red and green, warm amber and brilliant white, cold blue and sensuous yellow.

"We're coming," he called again, his voice ringing against the curved transparency as he shouted to alien ears. "We're coming to cut down your forests and ravage your soil. We're coming to build our cities and breed our children, delve for your minerals and take what we need. We're coming to ruin your splendid isolation, to send our ships and seed from star to star, from world to world until we own you all! All! All do you hear me? *All*! Every last damn one of you!"

He laughed as the stars stared back at him with frigid disinterest and felt a warm pride in what he was and the heritage which he carried.

"You won't stand a chance against us. We're like a disease, a rotten disease that will spread and spread and spread from start to star until none of you are free. We're like a germ burrowing towards rich food and when we find it our belly will open and the furious lust for life which is Man will burst forth to tear you apart and rebuild you into his own image. I know this, for I am God, and I hold your destiny in the hollow of my hand."

Bleak coldness and star-shot blackness. Glittering majesty and awful remoteness. The utter indifference of light which had started on its travels when man was a thing crawling in mud and which would continue when his native world was a frozen ball of ice and rock. The unfeeling dismissal of a giant for a gnat, of a world for bacteria, of a universe for a man.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he said, and saliva traced a wet path over his chin. "You think that we can't harm you, that you're too big to be touched, too far away. But you're wrong. We've travelled for a hundred years and can travel for a thousand more. We can lie dormant until aroused and then there is no power in all your suns to stop us from making you our own. And I can save you or

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destroy you. I can steer this lethal cargo away from you or I can make you my first victim!" Arrogantly he stared at the burning stars.

"Who wants to be the first? Do you?" He pointed towards a blue-white sun radiating high in the ultra-violet. "You?" A smaller, blinding white speck impossible distances away. "You perhaps?" A sombre red giant looming large and deceptively near. "Which shall it be?"

They stared at him, blankly, impassively, as if contemptuous of his challenge and, as he stared back at them, anger, hot and compelling surged through him so that his hands trembled and his eyes misted with hate.

"You then!" He sprang towards the control panel as he noticed a small, almost violet sun low down and towards the right. "You shall be the first!"

He grinned as he stooped above the controls, his lips drawn tight against his teeth so that he seemed to be snarling with enjoyment at the destruction to come. Around him the signal lights seemed to wink in pleased anticipation, red and green, cold blue and sensuous yellow, warm amber and brilliant white. He smiled at them, nodding as if towards an invisible audience, and his hands reached hungrily for the controls that would send his world heading towards the chosen star.

And repeated the same episode that he'd had in the garden.

He couldn't touch them. Strain as he might his hands refused to grip and twist, to send power surging to the silent engines. Then, as sweat dripped from his contorted features and frustrated anger tore at the loosening fabric of his mind, realisation came and he remembered.

A ship filled with colonists in suspended animation, heading out on its long, long journey towards the stars. A safe, almost fool-proof vessel with self-regulating, self-adjusting mechanisms, built to hold the venturesome seed of Mankind. But, because men cannot foresee everything and everything had to be taken into account, machines weren't enough. So a man had to be on constant watch. Not because he was necessary, but because weight for weight and size for size a man is the most compact and efficient general-purpose machine ever devised, and, in the remote event of breakdown, or external forces deviating the path of the ship, he had to be ready to act.

But the guardian had to be guarded against.

For loneliness can be a dangerous thing and the strongest mind can fall prey to strange fantasies when isolated among the alien splendour of the stars. So, as with the machines, the men had a built-in safety

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device, but that device was simpler by far than that needed for the machines. Post-hypnotic commands against arousing the women, against tampering with the machines, against altering the course of the ship. Especially against altering the course of the ship, for any deviation, no matter how slight, would mean a fatal error over light years of distance. But there was a trigger, there had to be. An alarm would release the artificial inhibition, an alarm or sub-conscious awareness of real urgency and they had even taken into account the breaking point of human endurance and guarded against that as well.

"A caretaker," he muttered and the stars seemed to look down and sneer. "A damned caretaker to a bunch of stinking machines! To hell with it!"

But he was smiling as he walked down the whispering corridors towards the sealed hatches of the deep-freeze.

This time there was no hesitation. Number three-ten had no red tab, number three-nine was empty and number three-eight had the warning signal against its seal. He pressed the button on three-ten and sat down to wait.

While he waited for the hidden machines to restore conscious life into the frozen body he stared thoughtfully at the sealed hatches. Not the best arrangement perhaps, but the best that they could do. Two hundred men and two hundred years of travel. It worked out at one year per man, sometimes more, sometimes less, but the average remained constant. One year each, the minimum loss of life expectancy per man, and that was important for the new world would need youth and vigour to conquer them, not men aged by sterile travelling through the void.

He smiled as machinery whined and the sealed hatch of three-ten opened and a long, narrow pad emerged from the dark interior.

A man sat up on the couch, yawning and rubbing his arms against the sting of hypodermics. A sullen-faced, dark-haired man with a grimly determined chin and a practical slope to his forehead. Gingerly he slipped from the pad, testing his legs after their hundred-year sleep, then nodded towards Sam.

"Everything all right?"

"Sure, Nat. Nothing to worry about at all."

"Want to chat for a while?" Nat seemed eager to enjoy the warmth of human companionship while he had the chance but Sam, because of his triggered indoctrination, had other ideas.

"No thanks. I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

"Just as you like," said Nat stiffly, then sat on his pad as Sam opened three-nine and prepared himself for deep-freeze. "When you're ready I'll seal you in." He hesitated. "How was it?"

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"Fine." Sam slipped off his shorts and relaxed on the pad. "A world of your own, son, an entire world all of your own." He grinned up at his relief. "Take care of her, Nat, she's all yours." Then, a figment of his fantasy returning. "Into thy hands I place my people."

"What?" Nat glared at him with sudden suspicion. "What did you say?"

"You'll find it in the library," said Sam tiredly. "I think."

Darkness closed around him as the pad retreated into the tiny cell and the thud of the hatch coincided with the sting of the preliminary hypodermic. Soon would come the drugs, the vapours, the death-defying cold but Sam knew that he would never feel it. He wouldn't feel anything until he awoke again at journey's end.

God smiled as he settled himself for sleep.

E. C. Tubb

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

There is an intriguing new serial commencing in the next issue—it is one of those complex stories where, apart from the excellent science fiction content, there is an underlying mystery as intense as any fast-action detective thriller. Charles Dye's "Prisoner In The Skull" has not seen magazine publication before and few readers outside the United States will be familiar with it. It has one focal point in common with Wilson Tucker's "Wild Talent"— a telepath —but there all similarity ends. In effect it portrays world efforts to *find* the telepath; a search which continues all through the story, overshadowed by an even greater mystery.

The shorter material is also well up to standard. There is a lengthy E. C. Tubb story, "The Robbers," a delightfully humorous yarn, "Reconnaissance," by Peter Cutler, "Trojan Hearse," a collaboration between Dan Morgan and new writer John Kippax, and Gregory Francis returns with a pleasant alien-culture story entitled "Hitch-hikers." Plus an article and features.

Story ratings for No. 27 have been held over until next issue to enable our overseas readers a better chance of having their opinions heard.

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Given two factors—the last man alive on Earth and the first contact of Earth by an alien race—what opinions would the aliens form concerning our culture ? And future ? Popular author C. M. Kornbluth turns this idea into a typically delightful story.

THE REMORSEFUL

By C. M. Kornbluth

It does not matter when it happened. This is because he was alone and time had ceased to have any meaning for him. At first he had searched the rubble over for other survivors, which kept him busy for a couple of years. Then he wandered across the continent in great, vague quarterings, but the plane one day would not take off and he knew he would never find anybody anyway. He was by then in his forties, and a kind of sexual delirium overcame him. He searched out and pored over pictures of women, preferring leggy, high-breasted types. They haunted his dreams; he brooded incessantly with closed eyes, tears leaking from them and running down his filthy, bearded face. One day that phase ended for no reason and he took up his wanderings again, on foot. North in the summer, south in the winter on weed-grown U.S.1, with the haversack of pork and beans on his shoulders, usually talking as he trudged, sometimes singing.

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It does not matter when it happened. This is because the Visitors were eternal; endless time stretched before them and behind, which mentions only two of the infinities that their " lives " included. Precisely when they arrived at a particular planetary system was to them the most trivial of irrelevancies. Eternity was theirs; eventually they would have arrived at all of them.

They had won eternity in the only practical way: by outnumbering it. Each of the Visitors was a billion lives as you are a billion lives—the billion lives, that is, of your cells. But your cells have made the mistake of specializing. Some of them can only contract and relax. Some can only strain urea from your blood. Some can only load, carry and unload oxygen. Some can only transmit minute electrical pulses and others can only manufacture chemicals in a desperate attempt to keep the impossible Rube Goldberg mechanism that you are from breaking down. They never succeed and you always do. Perhaps before you break down some of your specialized cells unite with somebody else's specialized cells and grow into another impossible, doomed contraption.

The Visitors were more sensibly arranged. Their billion lives were not cells but small, unspecialized, insect-like creatures linked by an electromagnetic field subtler than the coarse grapplings that hold you together. Each of the billion creatures that made up a Visitor could live and carry tiny weights, could manipulate tiny power tools, could carry in its small round black head enough brain cells to feed, mate, breed and work—and a few million more brain cells that were pooled into the field which made up the Visitor's consciousness.

When one of the insects died there were no rites; it was matter-of-factly pulled to pieces and eaten by its neighbouring insects while it was still fresh. It mattered no more to the Visitor than the growing of your hair does to you, and the growing of your hair is accomplished only by the deaths of countless cells.

" Maybe on Mars ! " he shouted as he trudged. The haversack jolted a shoulder blade and he arranged a strap without breaking his stride. Birds screamed and scattered in the dark pine forests as he roared at them: " Well, why not ? " There must have been ten thousand up there easy. Progress, God damn it ! That's *progress*, man ! Never thought it'd come in my time. But you'd think they would of sent a ship back by now so a man wouldn't feel so all alone. You know better than that, man. You know God-damned good and well it happened up there too. We had Northern Semisphere, they had Southern Semisphere so you know God-damned good and well what happened up there. Semisphere ? Hemisphere. Hemi-semi-demisphere."

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That was a good one, the best he'd come across in years. He roared it out as he went stumping along.

When he got tired of it he roared: "You should of been in the *Old* Old Army, man. We didn't go in for this Liberty Unlimited crock in the *Old* Old Army. If you wanted to march in step with somebody else you *marched* in step with somebody else man. None of this crock about you march out of step or twenty lashes from the sergeant for limiting your liberty."

That was a good one too, but it made him a little uneasy. He tried to remember whether he had been in the army or had just heard about it. He realized in time that a storm was blowing up from his depths; unless he headed it off he would soon be sprawled on the broken concrete of U.S.1, sobbing and beating his head with his fists. He went back hastily to Sem-isphere, Hem-isphere, Hem-i-sem-i-dem-isphere, roaring it at the scared birds as he trudged.

There were four Visitors aboard the ship when it entered the planetary system. One of them was left on a cold outer planet rich in metal outcrops to establish itself in a billion tiny shelters, build a billion tiny forges and eventually— in a thousand years or a million, it made no difference—construct a space ship, fission into two or more Visitors for company, and go Visiting. The ship had been getting crowded; as more and more information was acquired in its voyaging it was necessary for the swarms to increase in size, breeding more insects to store the new facts.

The three remaining Visitors turned the prow of their ship toward an intermediate planet and made a brief, baffling stop there. It was uninhabited except for about ten thousand entities—far fewer than one would expect, and certainly not enough for an efficient first-contact study. The Visitors made for the next planet sunward after only the sketchiest observation. And yet that sketchy observation of the entities left them figuratively shaking their heads. Since the Visitors had no genitals they were in a sense without emotions—but you would have said a vague air of annoyance hung over the ship nevertheless.

They ruminated the odd facts that the entities had levitated, appeared at the distance of observation to be insubstantial, appeared at the distance of observation to be unaware of the Visitors. When you are a hundred-yard rippling black carpet moving across a strange land, when the dwellers in this land soar aimlessly about you and above you, you expect to surprise, perhaps to frighten at first, and at least to provoke curiosity. You do not expect to be ignored.

They reserved judgment pending analysis of the sunward planet's entities—possibly colonizing entities, which would explain the sparse-

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ness of the outer planet's population, though not its indifference.

They landed.

He woke up and drank water from a roadside ditch. There had been a time when water was *the* problem. You put three drops of iodine in a canteen. Or you boiled it if you weren't too weak from dysentry. Or you scooped it from the tank of a flush toilet in the isolated farmhouse with the farmer and his wife and their kids downstairs grotesquely staring with their empty eye sockets at the television screen for the long-ago-spoken latest word. Disease or dust or shattering supersonics broadcast from the bull horn of a low-skimming drone—what did it matter? Safe water was what mattered.

"But hell," he roared, "it's all good now. Hear that? The rain in the ditches, the standing water in the pools, it's all good now. You should have been lonely Man back when the going was bad, fella, when the bull horns still came over and the stiffs shook when they did and Lonely Man didn't die but he wished he could . . ."

This time the storm took him unaware and was long in passing. His hands were ragged from flailing the broken concrete and his eyes were so swollen with weeping that he could hardly see to shoulder his sack of cans. He stumbled often that morning. Once he fell and opened an old scar on his forehead, but not even that interrupted his steady, mumbling chant: "Tain't no boner, 'tain't no blooper: Corey's Gin brings super stupor. We shall conquer; we will win. Back our boys with Corey's Gin. Wasting time in war is sinful; black out fast with a Corey skinful."

They landed.

Five thousand insects of each "life" heaved on fifteen thousand wires to open the port and let down the landing ramp. While they heaved a few hundred felt the pangs of death on them. They communicated the minute all-they-knew to blank-minded standby youngsters, died and were eaten. Other hundreds stopped heaving briefly, gave birth and resumed heaving.

The three Visitors swarmed down the ramp, three living black carpets. For maximum visibility they arranged themselves in three thin black lines which advanced slowly over the rugged terrain. At the tip of each line a few of the insects occasionally strayed too far from their connecting files and dropped out of the "life" field. These staggered in purposeless circles. Some blundered back into the field; some did not and died, leaving a minute haitus in the "life's" memory—perhaps the shape of the full-stop symbol in the written language of a planet long ago visited, long ago dust. Normally the thin line was not used for exploring any but the smoothest terrain; the fact that they

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took a small calculated risk was a measure of the Visitors' slightly irked curiosity.

With three billion faceted eyes the Visitors saw immediately that this was no semi-deserted world, and that furthermore it was probably the world which had colonized the puzzling outer planet. Entities were everywhere; the air was thick with them in some places. There were numerous artifacts, all in ruins. Here the entities of the planet clustered, but here the bafflement deepened. The artifacts were all decidedly material and ponderous—but the entities were insubstantial. Coarsely-organized observers would not have perceived them consistently. They existed in a field similar to the organization-field of the Visitors. Their bodies were constructs of wave-trains rather than atoms. It was impossible to imagine them manipulating the materials of which the artifacts were composed.

And as before, the Visitors were ignored.

Deliberately they clustered themselves in three huge black balls, with the object of being as obstreperous as possible and also to mobilize their field strength for a brute-force attempt at communication with the annoying creatures. By this time their attitude approximated: "We'll show these bastards!"

They didn't—not after running up and down every spectrum of thought which they could project. Their attempt at reception was more successful, and completely horrifying. A few weeks, attenuated messages did come through to the Visitors. They revealed the entities of the planet to be dull, whimpering cravens, whining evasively, bleating with self-pity. Though there were only two sexes among them, a situation which leads normally to a rather weak sex drive as such things go in the cosmos, these wispy things vibrated with libido which it was quite impossible for them to discharge.

The Visitors, thoroughly repelled, were rippling back toward their ship when one signalled; notice and hide.

The three great black carpets abruptly vanished—that is, each insect found itself a cranny to disappear into, a pebble or leaf to be on the other side of. Some hope flared that the visit might be productive of a more pleasant contact than the last with those aimless, chittering cretins.

The thing stumping across the terrain toward them was like and unlike the wave-train cretins. It had their conformation but was material rather than undulatory in nature—a puzzle that could wait. It appeared to have no contact with the wave-train life form. They soared and darted about as it approached, but it ignored them. It

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passed once through a group of three who happened to be on the ground in its way.

Tentatively the three Visitors reached out into its mind. The thoughts were comparatively clear and steady.

When the figure had passed the Visitors chorused: Agreed, and headed back to their ship. There was nothing there for them. Among other things they had drawn from the figure's mind was the location of a ruined library; a feeble-minded working party of a million was dispatched to it.

Back at the ship they waited, unhappily ruminating the creature's foreground thoughts: " From Corey's Gin you get the charge to tote that bale and lift that barge. That's progress, God damn it. You know better than that, man. Liberty Unlimited for the Lonely Man, but it be nice to see that Mars ship land . . . "

Agreement: Despite all previous experience it seems that a sentient race is capable of destroying itself.

When the feeble-minded library detail returned and gratefully reunited itself with its parent " lives " they studied the magnetic tapes it had brought, reading them direct in the cans. They learned the name of the planet and the technical name for the wave-train entities which had inherited it and which would shortly be its sole proprietors. The solid life-forms, it seemed, had not been totally unaware of them, though there was some confusion: For the vaster section of the library denied that they existed at all. But in the cellular minds of the Visitors there could be no doubt that the creatures described in a neglected few of the library's lesser works were the ones they had encountered. Everything tallied. Their nonmaterial quality; their curious reaction to light. And, above all, their dominant personality trait, of remorse, repentance, furious regret. The technical term that the books gave to them was: ghosts.

The Visitors worked ship, knowing that the taste of this world and its colony would soon be out of what passed for their collective mouths, rinsed clean by new experiences and better-organized entities.

But they had never left a solar system so gratefully or so fast.

C. M. Kornbluth

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We have published many stories depicting the human race meeting an alien culture for the first time—it is a theme with infinite possibilities. The following story has a neat solution to the problem facing two widely different interplanetary races with opposing environments.

ROCKFALL

By E. R. James

Illustrated by QUINN

". . . Aliens——"

The single word reached through the static. Lt. Peter Husband of the Three World's Space Force paused with one hand on the atom-pile damping control and the other on the gyro steering wheel. Without taking his gaze from the accelerometer above his head, he said: " 'Tune that in !"

He could not, however, help glimpsing the way Sergeant Gunner Murray glared across the tiny control cabin. Nor could he escape hearing the old spaceman's heavy sigh. Murray had a wife and family waiting his return to quarters on Mars; and scarcely a day had passed lately without at least one " alien ship " scare. Such scares were none of their business, for officially they were patrolling this section of the Asteroids maintaining law amongst the miners. And they had been

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just about to swing into an ellipse for a *Mars Landing*—magic words to men who have spent six months either cooped up in the tiny, artificial world of a Space Patroller or calling at mining outposts to settle quarrels and arbitrate on the spot over uneasy claim disputes.

The atompile was just heating up and the weight of the accelerometer was sliding gradually back towards the cushion spring, a sign that the mass of the little ship was being affected by the tiny pilot jet coming from the rockets.

"I say again," crackled the radio. Murray's curse was drowned by the voice as the radio operator found the dip in the centre of the carrier wave and the crackle eased. "This is the *Spasburga*, Interplanetary Mining Corporation Ship, registered at Asteroid City. We are running in on full blast from Ganymede, having had a brush with seventeen alien ships. One of these ships—similar to the small ships we reported observing four Earth weeks back—demolished a clearly marked mining installation, killing the seven employees working it. We took appropriate retaliation action and, being outnumbered, set blast for Mars."

"The *Spasburga*," murmured Peter and shifted his regard from the accelerometer's sliding weight to Murray's lined and just now sullen features. "That's Captain Klepper's ship, isn't it, Murray?"

"Yes. Good spaceman, but a dangerous hothead. Most likely he's destroyed a couple of meteors caught in Jupiter's gravitation field. Space jitters——"

"Perhaps," murmured Peter. He could almost feel Murray urging him to fire the rockets and so start the ship, which was already reversed and angled, on to her new course.

"Hello *Spasburga*," said the radio, "this is Captain Pompay of the Three World's Survey Ship *Capitol*. Your message received and understood. We are now relaying it to all destinations and are taking action. Stand by for new course corrections so that you may rendezvous with us in the shortest possible time."

There was a pause. The radio operator was licking his lips and Murray was holding his breath when Captain Pompay's rather irritable voice filled the cabin. "Hello all ships. Emergency. All unarmed ships stand by and report as called for, so that sectors 5, 6 and 7 of the Asteroid Area Solar West may be evacuated with all possible speed. Patrol ships and privately owned guard ships prepare to set course for rendezvous point with this ship. Switch to emergency 3 frequency if you require assistance in working out course trajectories."

"Goodbye, Mars!" sighed Murray.

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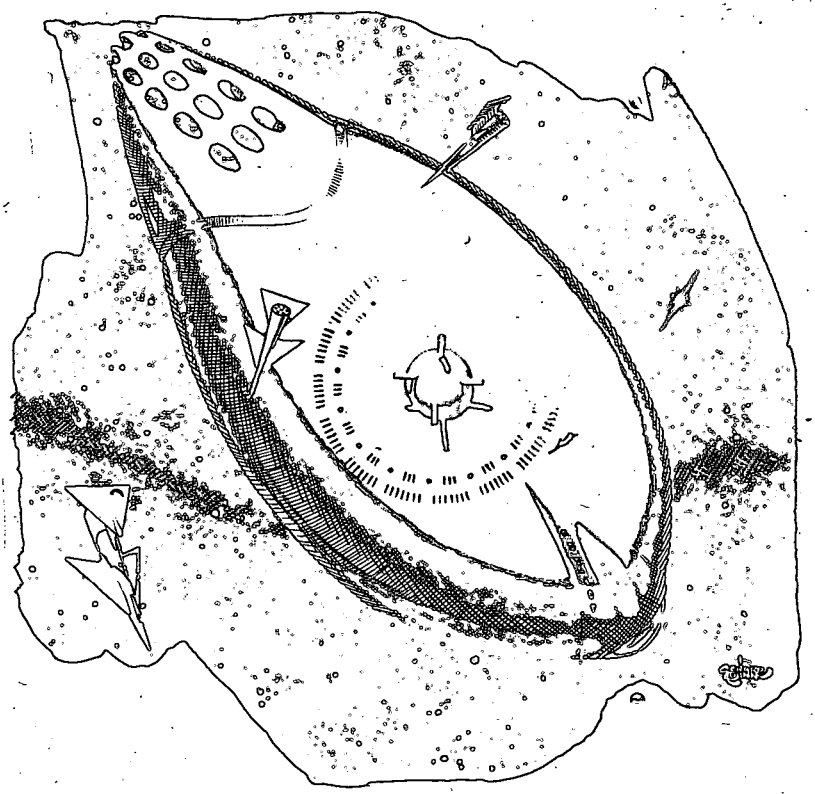

Peter's gaze, swinging around, met that of the young radio operator and found it as excited as his own. "Get the RV point first time they say it. Prepare ship for realignment."

Within ten minutes, Peter was pressing the firing button of the rockets and the little ship was swinging out into a hyperbolic course.

Nine hours later it reached the RV point, on an imaginary line drawn from Jupiter to the Sun, one million miles within what was known as the Mean Asteroid Orbit. Three other ships hung motion-

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less beside the vast barrel shape of the *Capitol* and a few thousand miles off a small, sunlit asteroid kept pace with them. Seven other armed ships were reporting themselves as being in various stages of approach.

Peter swung the little patroller right against the *Capitol's* dark side, and, going aboard, was shown at once to the marvellous observation room, designed for survey purposes but equally ideal for the direction of a naval operation.

A naval operation! He was abruptly aware of his uniform as, holding the rail of the glass table, he presented his brief report to Captain Pompay and then turned to either side to exchange compliments with merchant captains Klepper of the *Spasburga* and Aumond and Bissett of the *Cleaver* and *Shoveller II*, both Mars registered, lightly-armed mining ships. He could feel that they were all looking to him as though he would at once bring out the answer to the unprecedented problem facing them all.

"They have stopped," said Pompay, "on the other side of the Mean Asteroid Orbit, and they are one million miles from it on the Jupiter-Sun line." He pointed over Peter's head and Peter turned.

Television screens covered ceiling, walls and floor so that the five men could easily imagine themselves to be floating around their glass table protected from the dangers of Space only by a glass box. The screen behind Peter showed several dozen silvery needle shapes superimposed over Jupiter and its system of moons. He stared at them for a few moments before the significance of Pompay's words reached through the surface thoughts that fuzzed his mind. Men and Aliens faced each other across the imaginary average orbit of the Asteroids so accurately that both must be aware of it. The Aliens were taking their cue from the Men.

"Looks more than Captain Klepper's 17," murmured Peter.

Pompay released his breath in a sigh. "Thirty-nine now. Various sizes. Some as large as the *Capitol* and some smaller than your patroller. All appear peculiarly flat, but otherwise not particularly unconventional. Klepper says they all appear to be armed."

Peter shifted his gaze to Captain Klepper's red face.

"You destroyed one, you say?"

"Blew it to atoms!"

"To atoms? How?"

"Uh?" Klepper glared suspiciously. "Well—— I don't rightly know," he admitted resentfully. "You see we weren't expecting any trouble . . ." After a moment's hesistation he went on truculently: "There's never been any claim jumping or hijacking out there on Jupiter's moons. And living—let alone working—so far from the

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Sun's so much of a grind. So you can't blame us if we get slack with defence measures.

"After seeing the aliens three weeks back I had kept a man in the observation dome. When I ran up from the control room after seeing that damn little ship blast away our No. 2 working, the observation dome was empty. There was the flat little thing settling down where the working had been, and I was thinking of the seven men dead. Good space men! I was mad! I grabbed hold of the four pounder projector. It was a bit stiff but the breech opened all right. There were rocket charges in the racks but no warheads. All the time I was scared stiff the little ship would shoot off out of range. I yelled for someone to bring me warheads, but before they came I'd realised that the oxygen bottles beside the emergency spacesuits were just about the same thickness as a warhead. Almost without thought I grabbed one, clicked it into place on a charge, slammed it home, shut the breech and clamped up, took aim and fired. I'd have flung a kitchen stove at those devils. They deserved an A-bomb. I watched the trail of sparks, saw the bottle strike and then—" Klepper frowned in bewilderment. "There looked to be a hell of an explosion. Reckon I must have hit a vital part. It lit up the sky like a firework." Klepper, perspiration beading out from his red face, grinned.

Peter scowled at him. "It was afterwards when you found you were being followed by those original 17 ships?"

"It was. Man alive! I'm not quite crazy."

"You've no idea where they came from, have you?"

"Oh-h-h!" Klepper clapped his hands to the sides of his head. "A billion billion star systems to choose from—and he asks me that."

Peter held his temper. This man Klepper might easily have put the entire human race in jeopardy, but—even with 39 angry alien ships waiting to pounce on them—he could not refrain from mocking the inexperience of a junior patrol officer. The old fool.

Perhaps something of Peter's contempt showed in his eyes, for quite suddenly Klepper shivered. "I don't know what else I could have done. I had the safety of my crew to think about. And I'd been provoked. I— I——"

"I know." Peter could feel the cold, inimical darkness of Space in Klepper's voice. "I'd have done the same things, I expect. But you do seem to have disturbed a hornet's nest and it would be useful if we knew something about what we're up against, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," said Klepper.

Aumond spread his hands. "We were hoping that you . . ."

"Yes," said Blisset in his soft voice, "I'd heard that naval personnel are instructed in the theory of language—so that there'd be a chance

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they might fathom out a means of communicating with alien intelligences . . ." The expectancy faded from his face and the lines scored in it by long years in Space seemed to deepen.

Peter shook his head. "There was some such training years back. But it was cut out since there seemed no need of it until interstellar ships looked like becoming possible."

He looked over his shoulder at the 39 motionless, alien ships, and the others did the same.

"We can't just sit here," he murmured.

On the edge of his vision he saw Aumond's hands waving excitedly. "Then we must retreat. We cannot attack 39 ships with four and a patroller. We must fall back until joined by other craft from Mars."

"And what good will that do?" asked Peter. "They'll be as apprehensive of us as we are of them; but, if we back away it will give them the confidence they seem to lack."

"Where d'you get that from?" jeered Klepper. "It sounds like a blasted military text book."

"All right!" Peter almost shouted, swinging around. "Has any one of you a single course of action to suggest?"

Four startled faces, all of them more than twenty years older than his, waited for him to speak.

He addressed himself to Captain Pompay as senior officer present, but his heart was pounding and a small voice in the back of his mind was telling him that he was a fool. "It's quite obvious what we must do. We must find out whatever we can about these alien ships. A little knowledge now—no matter what it may cost us personally may save countless human lives in any later clash."

"Very true," said Pompay faintly.

Peter nodded. "You, sir, cannot of course risk the *Capitol* on such a desperate scheme." He looked around the other captains and could see how they hated him for giving them this chance to volunteer. But one couldn't really blame them. Klepper had had more than enough of the unknown already and Aumond and Blisset had probably worked all their lives to own the ships they captained so that they would be loth to risk them. "Nor," he continued, "should the other ships be used as long as there is a patroller on hand that might have been chosen for such a reconnaissance out of a much bigger fleet."

"No!" Aumond clenched his fists. "You shall not go alone. I——"

"You will obey the orders of the senior captain," said Peter reluctantly. He met Pompay's haunted eyes. "I suggest that the patrol boat, with its usual crew, shall be despatched in an attempt to draw the alien's fire." Well, now he had said it. It was the right thing to

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do of course. If he was successful and still alive afterwards, he would be certain of promotion. But perhaps he would be taking Murray and the radio operator to their deaths.

Already in his mind he was riding the blackness of interplanetary Space. But Pompay was saying something. ". . . your radio operator, Lieutenant Husband. We're finding it hard to keep up communication with Mars and Earth and ships making evacuations and coming here to reinforce us. I don't really like to ask you, but could you manage without him? Good morse operators are so scarce."

"You can have him. Sergeant Murray and I can manage, sir." Peter saluted and turned. As he pulled himself back down the passages to the patroller the thought crossed his mind that it was odd that a knowledge of the morse code might perhaps be the means of saving the life of that young radio operator.

Minutes later the patroller was lifting away from the *Capitol*, her rocket thrust giving a pleasant sensation of Earthly gravity while Peter finished his astrogational calculations. This was very different from the naval college. His life and Murray's might hang upon the accuracy of the figures that came from his pencil and were checked by the orbit computor.

He leaned to one side as he punched the course upon the tape of the autopilot, because he did not want Murray, the old hand, to see that a young officer's hands could tremble.

They were leaning back on the G-couches, one minute from the planned start of their first run, silent, when the radio hummed. "Hello, Patroller. *Capitol* calling Patroller. Small alien ship has been observed to leave opposing fleet and to be swinging out as though mirroring your own actions."

"Hello *Capitol*," replied Peter into the couch mike, "Patroller answering. Message received and noted."

"Sir," came Murray's voice from across the little cabin. "Now we will have a chance to show these rock borers and star gazers how to handle a situation like this."

"Good man." Peter was aware of a glow of pride. It was premature, he knew, because the only conflict he had so far faced were with himself and his allies, but it did a man good to realise that he had a good gunner with him.

Save for the unceasing click and murmur of the mechanisms providing them with their breathable air and tolerable warmth, the cabin held its silence until Peter cut the lights and warned: "Prepare for stress."

"Yes sir."

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Cushions solidified below them, heart and lungs strained and senses dimmed in a maze of protest.

With the Patroller broadside to the distant Sun, the rockets flung them back the way they had come. Occasional lights grew into small moons and faded with growing swiftness.

No longer did their speed keep them from falling towards the Solar fires. Here in Space where there was no friction, they were providing their own, shedding orbital velocity but at the same time, by tilting the rockets very gradually downwards towards the Sun, they were actually clawing their way out. The effect of these two motions, taken together, was to make them move out in a flattened ellipse with the incandescent gases of the rockets hidden as far as possible from the aliens by the hull of the ship itself.

Automatic rest periods of slackened blast, allowed for in the trajectory calculations, reminded them of the need for eating. Sleep came too easily, gave little rest in the continuous, straining of high blast. They dozed and existed in a kind of aching, bloodless stupor.

But at last the rockets cut altogether. The silence was worse than the noise. Stars glared like flashing spearheads. Pain wracked through over-strained nerves and muscles. They had described a complete half ellipse and were coasting again at orbital velocity. Peter forced himself to check their speed and position. Yes, they had come out of it well. Mid-way between the opposing forces they would cross an imaginary line drawn between them in about two hours.

He went to help Murray who was sweating over the handle that moved the four Earth-tons mass of the Patroller about its gyroscopes. A slow hard business even for two men, but Peter could see that to the older spaceman it was normal—a repetition of battledrill with the officer watching to see that no use was made of motors that might conceiveably be detected by a hypothetical enemy.

It was hard to realise that the enemy was real enough now. Memory of the silvery shapes magnified to visibility had faded——

"Calling Patroller. *Capitol* calling Patroller." The hull reverberated with the beamed message. "Alien ship has mirror-acted every motion you have made and is now running parallel to you so close that we cannot separate your images on our observation room screens."

"Hello *Capitol*," replied Peter, panting with excitement as much as from his recent exertion. "Patroller answering. Message received and noted."

"Within a mile or two," he murmured and exchanged glances with Murray, who had stopped work to stare. "Is the ship stable?" he added.

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Murray nodded. "Yes sir."

"Better let that do then and get to your guns."

"Yes sir." Murray clawed his way forward, his haste in the no-gravity conditions making him look oddly like a man under water.

Peter swallowed hard. Without looking out of the big curving ports, he could feel the blackness of space pressing in as the enemy's fire breached the hull. "Full battle order!" he heard himself say so harshly that it might have been the voice of a stranger.

He seemed, too, to be watching a stranger putting on the spacesuit battlegear. Surely this young man doing the drill so efficiently could not be himself? Even the sergeant's greater experience could not make him ready for what was to come before Peter tested the action of the emergency valve of his helmet and sat waiting in the clamps of the commander's seat.

Peter watched Murray test his valve action in turn and at the same time considered that the hours of drill, seemingly so meaningless at the time of practice, had been well worth every minute if only to serve to hide his fear and uncertainty from the sergeant.

"Person secured and suit tested, sir."

"Very good, sergeant. Load guns, but do not fire unless we are fired upon, without direct orders."

"Guns loaded, sir."

Peter nodded and his gloved hand switched on the radar search. Almost at once a black oval caught his attention. Ranging, he found it to be some eighty miles ahead and too large to be the enemy, for it must be three or four miles in diameter. He looked up. "What's that asteroid in front of us, sergeant?"

"Number 724. Chart doesn't give it a name, sir." The answer came so quickly that Peter realised Murray could see it plainly against the stars and had been identifying it for himself. "Composed of igneous rock," continued the sergeant while Peter turned back to his radar search. "One of the claims belonging to Interplanetary Mining, but farmed out to independent captains, that is being worked steadily."

"Where are you getting that from?"

"Police Manual, sir. I'm only using a pencil light so——"

"Quiet, Murray. I've got him. He's 3,000 yards off from our shadow side, almost parallel to us. Long and slender he is . . . perhaps long and flat because he would try to present us with a small target although perhaps he needs to keep broadside because that is where his weapons are." Peter hesitated and spoke sideways into the microphone while searching the blackness of Space between the glaring stars. "Are you receiving that O.K., *Capitol*?"

"Yes Patroller. Loud and clear."

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Peter put his head back, so that the nose of the patroller showed through his faceplate. Murray was nursing the guns breeches in the angle of his body, moving slowly as, awkward in the heavy suit, he swung himself to view the entire outer sky.

All was ready. Peter blinked and stared at the radarscope. The needle shadow had not moved upon the glowing screen but it—he counted the hair lines it spanned—was definitely growing. His hand, already upon the pile throttle, eased open the damper and again he tilted his head back. Yes, the weight of the accelerometer was again sliding very gradually towards the stern of the patroller. The two spacecraft were on converging courses, and some rapid manoeuvre might be called for soon.

"If there was a wall half a mile away from our dark side," said Peter, "the alien ship would be in the shadow we would cast."

"I think I can see it," said Murray. "Long and thin. Doesn't reflect much light. Sort of a neutral colour."

"Good," said Peter. He watched the shadow grow upon the 'scope and listened to Murray's hoarse breathing.

"I can see the glow of their reaction motor," gasped Murray.

Peter moistened his lips and wished there was some way he could wipe the sewat from his face. But at least Murray could not see how agitated he was.

"The thing's tilted—— Or we're a little higher in the Solar plane than it——, I——"

"What is it?" Peter's fingers worked around the knob of the atom-pile control. He looked away from the 'scope and saw the alien, grey against the blackness, a faint flicker visible from its further side.

Murray seemed to choke. "Like gun muzzles out of its nose. Lord! Sir—— What range is it?"

"Steady sergeant! Your guns are automatically——"

"Yes sir. I know that. I'm—all right. But—how thick d'you reckon it is?"

"Three feet—four at most," said Peter tensely. "We— We've got to accept that, sergeant. Steady, now."

"Three feet thick," muttered Murray. "Maybe six feet wide? Or are they on their side relative to us, so that true measurements are six feet thick—— No, that can't be—— not the way the jet is blowing out." He gulped. "And . . . thirty feet long!"

"Hold your fire," warned Peter. He took his eyes off the weirdly shaped ship and concentrated on the 'scope. If there was a sudden emergency, he would not have a hope of guiding the patroller through any speed turn. Only the autopilot could defy the gravity strains of

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acceleration and centrifugal force. And the autopilot had to have accurate information given to it by the 'scope. Peter watched the long shadow of the alien and the figures on the rangemeter just below.

Two hundred yards. Point blank range. Murray's breathing was harsher than ever, and quick.

A flash. A recoil shock. A second flash. A thunking sound. Peter pulled the atompile lever, concentrating on setting it at five minute blast, evasive action. The valve in his helmet thwacked shut and oxygen whistled like the voice of a ghost below his chin. The entire sky seemed to light up in a weird ragged glare like a curtain of fire burning continuously.

He was aware, too, of other automatic changes taking place in the cabin around him. But everything happened so swiftly—too swiftly for mere human senses. Within a second from his setting of the lever the acceleration struck, wheeling the patroller so that the rubber cushion pillowing Peter's forehead solidified. But, almost at once the direction of the thrust changed to dead ahead and his head sank back into the rear of his helmet.

As the thrust ceased he felt his thoughts take up as though the blood had never drained from them. Even as he lifted his head, he was wondering how the patroller's evasive action had been stopped. The only explanation he could imagine was that the alien ship had wheeled away so sharply that its occupants must have been subjected to several score of gravities—maybe several hundreds of gravities. What kind of—?

Or was it an automatic, remote controlled—?

He peered through bleared eyes at the glaring stars. And a fresh thought struck him. "Murray!" he yelled. "Murray! Damn you! You blew 'em to atoms, didn't you?"

"No, sir," gasped Murray faintly.

Peter could see that his gunner sergeant was only just stirring in the nose of the patroller.

"I slung a solid shot at them," panted Murray, turning his helmet to look back at Peter. "They fired first. I saw their rocket missile flaring at us before I fired. They really did fire first. I'm no scared—"

"Watch the sky, sergeant," said Peter.

It had been a bad incident. The captains listening to their words would scarcely feel increased confidence in the navy. And the senior officers of the Space Navy would not gain much of an impression of him and his handling of this situation. For, whether the patroller survived this clash or not, the *Capitol* would be recording the speech beamed back to her in accordance with standard reconnaissance procedure.

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While these thoughts raced through his mind, Peter worked the radar search. Failing to locate anything except the asteroid—previously in front of them but behind and receeding now that their relative velocities had been altered—he called to Murray. "See anything, sergeant?"

"Nothing, sir." Murray sounded as though he, too, thought more of the recording of their voices than of the alien's menace. "We have jumped almost straight ahead. And that's strange, sir. Asteroid 724 is a mile or two in the rear of our rockets or I wouldn't have believed it."

"Good deduction." Peter could have kicked himself for not uttering those words. It was the sort of thing the listeners would want to hear.

He leaned back in his seat. It was a reflex action accompanying his racing thoughts; in non-gravity conditions one could relax in any position, as he was not above thinking as the straps pressed against his thighs in reaction to his other muscle-induced actions.

Action—re-action. In Space that was a rule even more apparent than on Earth where there were qualifying agents such as friction and gravitation. So how could those aliens stand the centrifugal force of the sharp turn they must have made away from him? And, unless they could move with a speed approaching light (and they had shown no such fantastic ability up till then), where could they have gone out of his sight—and out of the superhuman detection of the radar search.

He spoke into the microphone of his helmet. "Hello *Capitol*. Patroller calling. Have you seen alien ship moving off?"

"*Capitol* answering patroller," said the far away voice of Captain Pompay. "We have observed no action subsequent to the merging of both your image and that of the alien with Asteroid 724. That is all."

"That's it." Peter reached for the controls. "Prepare for landing, sergeant. The aliens are on the asteroid—"

"Sir!" interrupted Murray in alarm. "Wait, sir. We're holed, I think. Air pressure is zero in the cabin. Yes, sir." Twisted around in the seat in the nose, he lifted a bulbous arm to point. "He's whanged some kind of solid missile right through us, and it's 'splashed' on its way out—a dead centre bull on the blasted tool kit."

Peter recalled the thunk of his suit's valve as it closed. A fine ship's captain he was turning out to be in his first major action, not even to have noticed his ship was emptied of air. Not, of course, that there was any danger to themselves in that, for there was a plentiful supply of bottled air——

"Bottles of air . . ." he murmured thoughtfully. Captain Klepper had confessed to firing a bottle of air at another alien ship. "Sergeant,"

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he said, " what d'you suppose caused that curtain of fire between us and them?"

" Uh? No idea, sir. Never seen anything like it."

" Nor I," mused Peter. " You're sure you hit them?"

" Certain, sir."

" H'm . . ." Peter pulled himself around so that he could look back at the half disc of the asteroid. " We'll circle once round that—and then see if we can use the miners' radar approach to set down by the workings. Even if we don't see the aliens—we can get tools from the mine, patch the hull and pipe some air in. I'm not too keen on going all the way back in suits."

Like a black hole tunnelled amongst the stars the dark side of the asteroid opened out as Peter skidded the patroller around it. The Sun floated around behind it, was eclipsed and floated out on the other side to meet them.

" There's the workings," said Murray but Peter had seen them and was nodding as the radar beam on the surface answered his universal call.

Within half an hour they were down and the patroller secured on the concrete landing beside the mine.

Stillness was a quality men became hardened to in Space but as Peter stared down at the deserted workings a chill made him shudder. And then he gasped. Only a few hundred yards off the alien ship towered against the sky like a futuristic monument.

" Sir ! What's that?"

" What, sergeant?"

" S - something went into that mine entrance." Murray pointed. " Wriggling like a snake."

" Oh?" The black hole beside a corrugated aluminium stores structure was large enough to hold anything . . .

" Gawd !" gasped Murray, and Peter turned with a start.

The sergeant was swinging his guns around to point them at the ship.

" Hold your fire !"

" Yes sir." Murray hunched over the guns, licked his lips.

Peter looked up at the accelerometer, staring at it with an effort of concentration. The weight was sliding down towards the surface of the asteroid, but it moved so very slowly that there could be no useful gravitational field: the asteroid's mass was too small to enable him to walk upon its surface.

Peter unfastened himself from his seat. His fingers trembled so disgracefully that he was thankful that Murray concentrated on the

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ship. "Sergeant," he said. "We must find out everything possible. I'm going to investigate that mine entrance. A-at the worst, perhaps I'll be able to get a stores kit—er—a repair kit from stores. You must cover me."

Murray had turned his head and the facepiece of his helmet confronted Peter for so long that he thought the intercom. had failed. "D'you hear me, sergeant?"

"Uh? Er—yes . . . sir. Yes sir."

"So long, then." Peter wrenched out the plug that connected him with the ship's battle circuits. He switched on his radio and checked that Murray was in contact with him. "Not that you're likely to be able to pick up anything I say if I go underground," he said hoarsely.

He pushed himself off from the seat and floated awkwardedly towards the airlock. He pushed himself through its short barrel leaving both its doors open. Hanging on to the outside handle, he fastened himself to a reel of steel wire, fixed by the outer hatch for working in free fall. From the height of the patrolier's nose cabin with nothing between himself and the alien ship and the dark shadow of the mine entrance he did not trust himself to speak.

He waved to Murray's muffled figure, received an answering wave, and unhooked the harpoon gun from beside the reel, took rough aim and sent the rocket ripping a second wire down towards the mine entrance.

After pausing only to make sure that the harpoon had screwed itself into the rock of the asteroid, he thrust the gun back into its place and swarmed hand over hand down the wire.

The shadowy entrance swelled to meet him. He got his feet on the rock, found a handline left by the hastily departed miners. His stomach seemed full of ice and he felt sick. But he could feel Murray's eyes fixed upon him and somehow that gave him courage enough to half-walk, half-pull himself forward. Nothing showed in the gloomy depths of the vertical shaft, not even when he braced himself and switched on his helmet lamp and sent the shadows scurrying into the depths.

"Perhaps you imagined it, sergeant," he croaked into the radio. "I'm going down a little way."

He listened to the sergeant's tense reply as though in a dream, glanced at the nearby alien ship, felt for the gun holstered at his belt and forced himself to step over the edge and heave himself on down.

Head first into the darkness, he went, letting his own momentum carry him down with the handlines rasping against the multi-layer fabric of his gloves.

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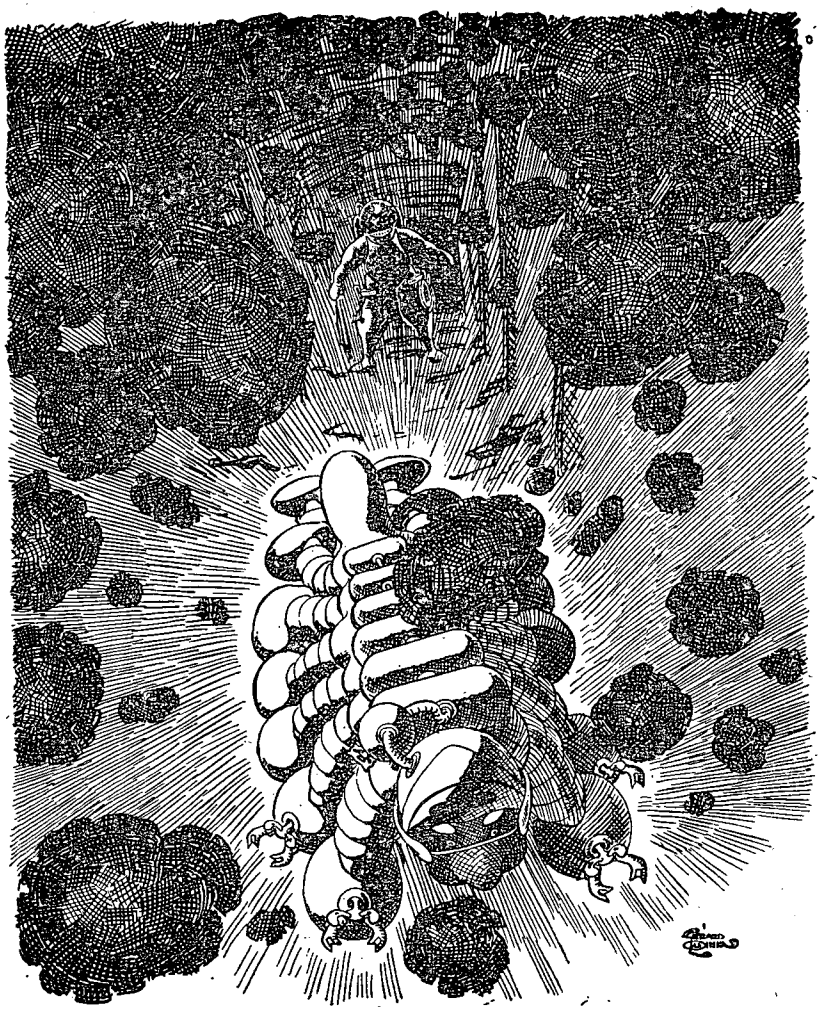

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The bottom of the shaft seemed to float up to meet him. At the last moment he gripped the handline so that his feet swung around and he landed rather flat-footedly upright but crouching so as to present as small a target as possible. Battle drill in these conditions was instinctive.

Some twenty greyish things upright and scattered away in open order through the flat level of the mine working reflected back the light of his helmet. For a moment he stared at them uncomprehending, and then he realised that they were all some kind of pit-prop. He wondered why such things should be necessary on such a tiny planet where gravitational attraction was almost nil—and then he realised that there was something gripped in his hand.

He looked down at the gun. He could not remember having drawn it. That was what battle drill did for you.

He moved his helmet from side to side, sweeping the working with his light. Fissures or cracks wound over the roof of the working. Double cables ended in pulleys on the far wall and bucket containers clipped to the cables showed how the ore had been brought to the shaft. Hand lines stapled to the limits of the cleared space suggested to him that he might work around to examine the piles of rubble and ore and abandoned gear where the miners had been working when disturbed.

Common sense urged him to go just far enough to locate enough explosive to destroy anything living in this place; and the urge for self-preservation demanded that he should flee without even waiting for such time-wasting action.

But there was Sergeant Murray who would be only too ready with the criticisms of age. And if there was anything here in the workings it had had plenty of time to attack him already. And—what a compliment it would be if he could somehow communicate with the alien if it was alive, or if he could find out anything about it if it was dead . .

With his boots scraping on the floor and the line vibrating in his hands, he edged sideways to the side of the working. His breath came so fast ! His heart pounded so hard ! His nerves jumped so uncontrollably : if only he had the slightest idea what to expect . . .

What did he know of the aliens? For it was not true to say he knew nothing. He knew that they could stand the tremendous synthetic gravity strain of a big angle turn at high velocity; or the alien ship would have caused the patroller to turn for much longer than had proved to be fact. Of the explosion of one alien ship when it was hit with an oxygen bottle, and of the curtain of fire between the patroller and another ship his mind could make nothing . . .

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Suddenly he realised that the tension had gone from him. Decision followed the realisation and, before he had time to work himself up into another panic, he edged forward along the wall, one hand keeping himself steady on the hand line and the other resting upon the gun at his belt.

Presently a jumble of rubble and gear caught at his feet. He stumbled over it with difficulty and, looking up on its far side, found that the entire remainder of the working was open to his gaze.

It seemed empty.

Then something moved. And he saw it.

Like a fat slug—one foot thick, two feet wide and six feet long—many legged like a centipede, but with multiple claw-like digits, one to each leg . . . He gaped at it, and he could feel the gun that had again come almost magically into his trained hand.

He slowly realised that the movement, which had taken place at its nearest end, had been the covering of transparencies by vizors which had a definite mechanical appearance. It was also holding something in the claws nearest to him. On its back were long, slender cylinders vaguely like the fatter oxygen cylinders on his own back. He fought against a crawling horror of such an unknown and different creature, and felt oddly reassured when he thought he noticed a difference in its outer texture between a possible " body " section at the centre and rear and a probable " head " section in its front. Although it was horizontal, while he was erect, there was comfort in such a seeming similarity.

Quite obviously, then, the alien must have requirements for existence that, like his own need of oxygen and equable temperature, were not to be found in the harsh vacuum of Space.

Bug-eyed monster? He thrust the derisive term into the back of his mind. It was alien.

He endeavoured to look at the scene, historic in its way, as though through the eyes of an observer. Man and Alien. Presumably it would be surveying him with an interest and caution duplicating his own reactions—and likely to be common to all thinking entities when confronted with something new and different and therefore unpredictable.

But it was all very well to think like that. His thoughts began to consider his own position. He, the Earthman out of his own elements, was always in danger in Space. The thin suit—he could remember even then that he had found its material thick and hampering not so long ago in the Naval College — was no protection against missiles. And he was being threatened with something in those claws.

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He stood erect beneath the low roof, wishing that the pit props were other humans, and stared down at the alien as sweat began to gather on his skin, joining together in the near absence of gravity to gather into itching globules until every nerve quivered in protest and his finger trembled against the trigger.

If the thing had only some semblance of humanity—if there was only some means of communicating with it—if there was only something—anything that could serve as a common base between them—members of two such differing creature-types . . .

His gun arm was beginning to ache. Moving slowly so that he would not alarm the alien he changed the gun over to his other hand.

The alien began to move and his grip on his gun tensed. He did not want to kill except in last resort. The drill manual advised that, when trying to capture an enemy, one should aim at his oxygen cylinders, thus destroying the enemy's means of prolonging life and frightening him into surrender.

He kept his aim steady on the cylinders on its back as it slowly closed up. Wrinkles appeared in its hide—or was it the fabric of a spacesuit analogous to his own? In spite of his overwrought condition he noticed the massive size and number of its feet.

Shortened to about four feet, wrinkled so evenly that the marks almost suggested a kind of coiled spring, it stopped. And it looked as though it had increased its stability and striking power.

Peter realised that, standing up as he did, he presented a splendid target should that contraption in the alien's claws turn out to be a weapon—and what else could it be? With his free hand on the handline, which was stapled to the rock at his side, he pushed himself down into a crouch and his skin crawled with sweat globules running together.

The alien moved again, bringing several more of its claws together around the mechanism it held.

Sweat took that moment to run into his eyes. Unable to see, he lost control for an instant. His finger closed on the trigger. Even as he felt the recoil he was cursing himself for the lapse. But there was no going back.

The flash of his weapon seemed to be mirrored by a flash from the alien's mechanism. Something struck the back of his helmet. He thought he saw his own shot carry away a cylinder from the alien's back. Thunk! That would be a valve closing somewhere in his suit. He felt giddy and cold. That would be a loss of suit pressure.

There was a blinding, searing flash and he felt as though a mighty wind beat over him . . .

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Senses came swimming back. His heart strained and pounded. His lungs heaved and his throat seemed choked. He tried to raise his arms to restore the oxygen supply by switching to the spare cylinder, but found they were gripped.

Panic lifted a ragged curtain and he fought to prevent himself plunging over a very real precipice of hysterics. How much could a man stand?

He tried to open his eyes and found that they were open. He hung panting feebly, his breath whistling in and out, in and out, in—out, in—out—

He had been a suicidal fool to come down— No ! He was wasting time thinking like that. He gathered his strength and tried to bend his arms. He went on trying. Did they move a little in the darkness? The inside of the suit was slippery with his sweat. Yes, he was sure that his arms bent slowly. Oh, so slowly. He tried moving them sideways and they came up on either side, rubbing rough rock faces behind and before.

His fingers closed over the mechanism at the top of the spare cylinder. Blessed taps. He felt the vital gas cold upon his neck as it made up suit pressure. And he laughed as it flowed like heady wine into his mouth and lungs. Men got drunk on too much oxygen. Reality faded into a pleasant haze in which his thoughts floated beautifully.

Oxygen. Indeed a most active gas. It could make a man drunk, or— It could, when mixed with whatever gas the aliens used, ignite spontaneously . . . On Earth in coal mines there was fire-damp that did that. Fire-damp was a hydro-carbon, and it was otherwise known as methane.

Methane is the greatest single constituent of the vast atmosphere of all four of the giant planets. But he was drunk, indeed, to think such a crazy notion . . .

But the alien looked as though it was equipped to support itself under an enormous gravitational attraction. All those thick legs. That flat, low body . . . No ! He must be going mad to consider such evidence when—

Could scientists and experienced space-captains be wrong? After all no human being had ever been right down on the frozen surfaces of any one of the giant planets. No human being could exist there. So no human being could know for certain what might be possible at such pressures in such temperatures and under such gravitation.

Might it not be so? What other possibility was there? Not a single motion of the alien ships had suggested they might be capable of inter-stellar flight, any more than Earth rockets were.

Earth rockets?

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The patroller. Peter wondered if he would see it again. His mind seemed to fall back into his aching body with a jolt.

His arms were still above his head and he pushed them forward over the top of his helmet to the lamp. Its glass cover was a mess of jagged shards that he cleared away to find its filament bent and broken. He found the spare filament intact and sighed with relief. It lit as he pushed it home and he stared at the vertical wall of broken rock in front of him.

At first he thought that he had been taken or blasted into a crevice—and then he saw that the " wall " came down from the roof and was suspended a few inches above the floor like a still photograph taken from a film.

It would be falling as he watched. He remembered the very slow movement of the accelerometer weight.

A pit prop's shattered end caught his eye. He pushed himself down to the floor and looked beneath the falling mass of rock.

The grey, slug-shape of the alien startled him; then he realised from its disorganised posture that it was either dead or unconscious. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he could see a glimmer of starlight striking down the mine shaft.

He turned and the rock made a falling curtain through which no light could come, and through which he could not hope to force a way free. He thrust himself forward all the same, tearing apart falling stone masses and then coming up against others so big that his boots skidded and his frantic efforts sent him flying off as his hands lost their hold. No, he thought as he fetched up against other jagged, suspended masses behind him, I cannot hope to get out that way. He struggled free, back into the part of the working by the wall that must have reflected the force of the explosion up on to the roof. He stumbled over the inert alien, lightly enough since his feet were scraping over the floor after kicking himself off from the rackfall behind him.

If the inertia of the rock masses had sent him into a panic, the inertia of the alien brought him out of it.

Peter fended himself off from the wall beyond, steadied himself and frowned. Supposing the alien did come from the 16,000 mile deep atmosphere of Jupiter, then it would be accustomed to a pressure . . . an unthinkable pressure . . . He seemed to remember reading somewhere that at Jupiter's solid surface the pressure of the gas envelope would be fully a million times that of air at the surface of the Earth. He swallowed. If there was gas at that pressure within that slug-like skin, it was no wonder the alien wieghed so much. The gas alone would weigh many tons . . .

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With such weight, and with muscles accustomed to supporting the mighty gravitational attraction of Jupiter, the alien might be able to force its way through the rock fall even now—providing the attempt was made at once before the immense fragments packed down solid.

Peter put his gloved hands on the grey hide and it felt like steel. He tried to shake the creature but his hands either slipped over the hide or he only succeeded in shaking himself. A fly might have attempted to move a hippopotamus with more success.

He rested a moment looking at the rock masses and shuddering to note that some fragments had evidently struck the floor and were rebounding in the same inexorable slow motion towards him. It would be horrible to be slowly crushed—to feel the suit pressing in on him as rock came down on him at something like an inch in ten minutes.

Hands clenched, he forced his eyes away from the rock and looked down at the alien. How could he wake it? If it lived?

He got his hands under the vizors that he had seen move and found that he could get them up, although only agonisingly slowly because of their evident great weight. Remembering that the alien had seemed to feel some discomfort from his headlight, he shone it into the opaque ovals below. And the creature moved, shuddering, and was inert again.

It lived. At least it lived. Could he revive it in some way? What had he done to revive himself? Turned on the reserve oxygen, of course. Then——

He found the tap to the second cylinder on the alien's back. It turned as he strained, slowly it turned.

The alien shifted beneath him, its legs and claws heaved it erect, and the speed with which it set off caught him by surprise and spun him around like a top.

He struck the wall, steadied himself, turned and stared at a tunnel in the rockfall that was all to be seen of the alien's departure. In spite of his own danger, his skin crept. Nothing in all his experience could have equalled that performance. His amazement—although he had expected some such event—held him spellbound for long seconds, before he recovered his wits enough to dive into the escape hole.

Dust and debris was beginning to choke the hole and the shaft beyond as rock masses collided and ground together in the unearthly slow-motion fall. He heaved himself up the handline to the surface and glanced thankfully around the starlit workings.

His hands closed around the harpoon wire and he drew himself up hand over hand. As he rose, the alien ship away to his right appeared

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to sink until most of its height showed grey against the shadowy rock and he saw that it was flickering with an intermittent light that reminded him of the tense moments when the ships had first approached each other.

"Sergeant!" he whispered tensely into the suit's microphone. "Sergeant——"

"Wait a minute, sir!"

The urgency in Murray's voice surprised him. He let the wire run through his hands and stared up at the observation ports above him.

The open airlock swooped down at him so suddenly that he landed against the patroller's hull with an undignified clatter. Scrambling into the familiar cabin, he halted in fresh surprise. For Murray stood staring out of a port and leaning towards the alien ship. In his hand was a signalling lamp and he was blinking it and apparently getting answering signals.

Peter's mind staggered and, unable to decide on any action, he waited in silence.

Suddenly Murray turned to him. "You're going to think I'm going mad, sir. But—"

"But what, sergeant?"

"Well, when I was trained we were all given a course in the theory of basic language. That flickering started up soon after you'd gone into the shaft—and I'd got nothing to do except watch it. I remember thinking that it was like the flickering when the ship was coming in at us before. And it occurred to me—sort of easy-like that it wasn't likely to be a reaction motor, because they had come towards us with such an even drift. They were just coasting like we were. And I got thinking of that basic language theory stuff and—well, I know it sounds crazy, but I'm sure I got some kind of sense out of those light signals."

"You do. But how?"

"Well, the first contact with an alien intelligence is going to form a pattern. I introduce myself and the alien introduces himself. Then he says where he's come visiting from, and I say where I live when I'm at home. Sort of a logical sequence, subject to variations of course. It all came back to me. And—"

"Go on, man!"

"Well, sir, I get the idea that he—that alien fellow out there,—and its mate that was underground with you—they come from Jupiter. I—I've kept on at them, sir, and they've given me a lot of what I reckon are checking figures. Some of them mean nothing to me. But one was 1,047. And that is the number of planets the size of Jupiter needed to make up a mass equal to the Sun. See what I mean, sir? Makes sense, don't it. But—"

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" Well?" urged Peter excitedly.

Murray gulped. " This is the whackiest bit of all. I make up some data to let him know I'm from Earth. I began by taking his statement about Jupiter as being right. I gave him a single flash and then five flashes. That's about the ratio of Earth's distance from the Sun compared with Jupiter's. I gave him another single flash and then did 317 which is the weight ratio between the two planets. And——

" D'you know, sir, he just don't seem to believe me. It's like as though he can't believe anything alive could have evolved on Earth."

" No?" Peter held his breath.

Well, if Earthmen found it hard to believe life might exist in the—to them—shocking conditions; might not Jovians find it equally hard to credit the existence of another form of life in the—to them—superheated and tenuous poison gases of little Earth?

It was possible.

And if it was true, then it meant the threatened clash of the two races might not take place. For just as Earthmen might never be able to descend to the surfaces of the giant planets, so the inhabitants of the giant planets almost certainly would not covet the very different worlds of the inner planets.

The crisis looked as though it was over.

E. R. James

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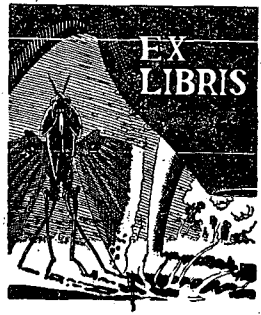

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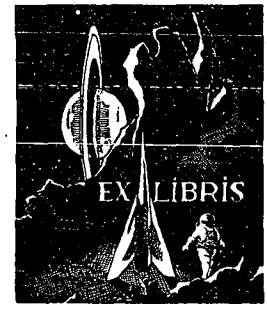

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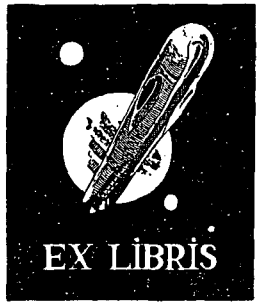

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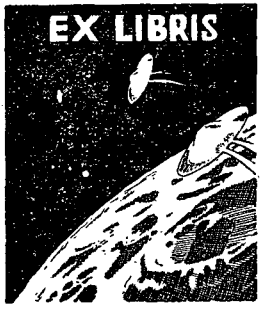

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The number of science fiction books appearing in this country is increasing, but they are mostly confined to the minority group of publishers who have boldly labelled their wares as such, and by packaging their titles, as it were, along side their lists of westerns, thrillers and romances, make selection convenient for the science fiction enthusiasts. At the same time, unfortunately, such books are rendered easily avoidable, contents unsampled, for the vast majority of buyers and borrowers, to whom science fiction still stands for very juvenile space opera. Let's face it, science fiction has not outgrown the stigma attached to it unfairly by uniformed criticism, and fairly by the association of written and visual crudity in the form of poorly conceived pulp magazine stories, comic strips and "B" extravaganzas of the cinema. What serious student of science has not in the past carefully turned back the lurid cover of his favourite magazine, and protested in vain the works of Wells and Stapledon to justify his enthusiasm? One wonders whether a new name—a more acceptable nomenclature —for this type of literature will be the solution to a vexing problem. If the undeserved sneers of the uninitiated can be forestalled by some as yet unimagined classification, then there is still a great future for science fiction. Until then let us be glad that the current infiltration tactics are strengthened by such books as **More Than Human.**

Theodore Sturgeon's new novel **More Than Human** is published by Victor Gollancz (12/6) and, sheltered by the familiar yellow jacket, will reach, I hope, a far wider and more discerning public which will appreciate the literary quality of this fine science fiction novel, enjoy the startling treatment of its ESP theme—and begin looking for more of the same. Sturgeon's book won the *International Fantasy Award* for 1954 (a fact which the publisher kindly proclaims on a special jacket streamer) and has been mentioned before in this magazine. I can only repeat that Sturgeon has treated his concept of symbiosis—in which six strangely assorted humans, ranging the gamut of I.Q.'s from idiocy to genius, combine to form *Homo Gestalt*, one unit of a new superior race—with intense insight into human psychology and feeling for the new values equated by the unknown 'psi' powers.

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And he combines ingenious plotting with suspenseful action to make an inspired and incomparable science fiction novel which can rightfully take its place with contemporary ' straight ' novels of high repute.

In complete contrast, Philip Wilding's **Space-Flight Venus** (Hennel Locke 9/6), is the sort of trivial nonsense which can have but limited appeal. The style is strongly reminiscent of the " Flash Gordon " type of comic-strip, replete with handsome virile space-men and their beautiful, bosomy female counterparts, all dressed in the correct 21st century space-technician fashion—a ' bare ' minimum of nylon and ornaments. The story opens with the lovely Fiona Cathay joining as a scientist the gadget-ridden secret rocket field in Mexico, from which her ever-loving space pilot, Dale Picart, will lead an expedition to Venus. An orthodox route is to be used, via an earth satellite and subsidiary fuelling stations, and indeed some serious attempt is made to infuse a little scientific accuracy in this episode. But the inevitable happens and the Venusians turn out to be—yes, handsome virile men and their beautiful bosomy female counterparts, without exception, and complete with a super-scientific utopian set-up. One of the Earthmen, though, is a villian, and becomes a drunken murderer, hardly the conduct one expects on Venus, and I was relieved to find he came

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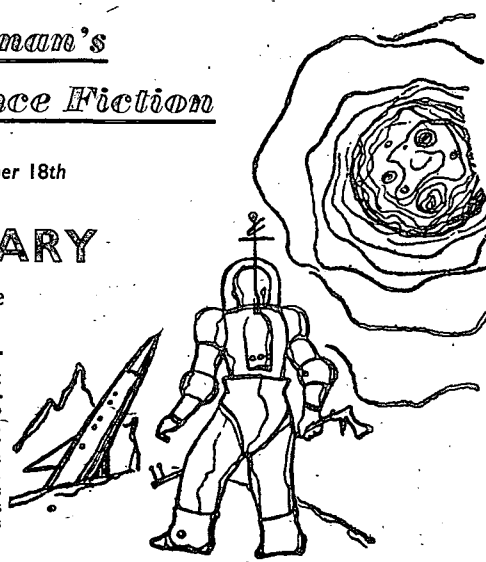

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to a sticky end, whilst Dale, who for one awful moment nearly fell for a Venusian plunging neckline, returns safely to the immaculate Fiona. Well, well!

In **The Wheel in the Sky** by Rafe Bernard (Ward, Lock & Co., 9/6) the theme is the building of Earth's first man-made satellite, but here also the banality of dialogue, male virility and female delectability, are nearly the same level as " Space-Flight Venus." Big Sam Hewitt is a he-man scientist who leads the space armada to its rendezvous in orbit around the earth. The construction of the space-wheel is a minor matter, though, despite its canopy of rays for protection against meteors. Of prime importance is the sabotage and murders which are happening mysteriously on the space-station, and the unexpected visit in a supply ship of the chief's daughter, Dania. Although immediately incarcerated on her father's orders, the news soon spreads round, and the men's morale deteriorates, especially after their nasty interpretation of the girl's visit. However, the communist traitors are unmasked and the publicity about Dania was used to encourage woman volunteers for the satellite, thus avoiding one biological drawback to space service.

The companion volume in Ward, Lock's first science fiction list is **Colonists of Space** by Charles Carr (also 9/6). This is a very poor and uneven tale of an interstellar expedition to discover another inhabitable planet, and the perils which beset the queerest crew I have ever encountered in science fiction. Following an unsuccessful mutiny, the ships land on the planet Bel and finds it populated by the survivors and descendents of an earlier expedition. Frankly this is the kind of book it is difficult to pick up once you have put it down.

Henry Kuttner's **Mutant** (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 9/6) is neither a novel nor strictly a short story collection, but an uneasy mixture of linked episodes in the history of the Baldies, a hairless race of human telepaths, sprung from the effects of atomic-bomb radiation. The separate stories were originally published in *Astounding Science Fiction* over a period of time, so that the repetitive background detail was fairly essential for each new story in the series. However this tends to become tedious and boring when brought together in one volume. Apart from this one defect, these studies of the emotional conflict between normal humans and the strangely gifted Mutants, made more complicated by the paranoic faction among the " Baldies " themselves, are very satisfying science fiction. Kuttner has a slick, convincing style of writing and wields the terminology of the new science of extra-sensory perception with great effect. Definitely an addition to the basic science fiction library for its intelligent approach to what may

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eventually be (if science fiction is again prophetic) the most important development in human history since the first man began to reason objectively.

Of the two new anthologies, **Star Science Fiction Stories** edited by Frederick Pohl (Boardman 9/6) is aptly named. When published originally in America, the fifteen stories included were commissioned specially for the book. Subsequently two of these gems, Lester del Rey's " Idealist " and Robert Sheckley's " The Last Weapon," were reprinted for the first time in the pages of this magazine. Practically all of the stories are superior to the general run of anthologies, and the galaxy of big names, such as Bradbury, Asimov, Leinster, Clarke, Gold, Simak, Leiber, Kornbluth, etc., is not merely for effect. I enjoyed every one, and I think you will agree with me that this is a rare science fiction treat. On the light-weight (and lighter), side are Kornbluth's " Dominoes " and Gold's " The Man With English "; the broad humour of Fritz Leiber's hilarious travesty " The Night He Cried," and a curious piece by Arthur C. Clarke called " The Nine Billion Names of God." I liked the gentle irony of William Tenn's " The Deserter," and John Wyndham's delightful time-twist in " The

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Chronoclasm." I inhaled with very great pleasure Ray Bradbury's "A Scent of Sarsaparilla," and was moved by Simak's "Contraption" and Judy Merril's poignant "So Proudly We Hail." I recommend this collection unhesitatingly.

Concealed behind the uninspired title of **Strange Adventures in Science Fiction,** edited by Groff Conklin (Grayson & Grayson 9/6), is a further selection of nine stories from the original "Omnibus of Science Fiction." Apart from the unfortunate inclusion of A. E. van Vogt's interminable, and often faintly ridiculous, "Recruiting Station," the level is fairly good, although Dr. Keller's vintage and horrifying "The Doorbell" seems rather out of place. The humour in Damon Knight's "Catch That Martian" is a little laboured, but the point in Theodore Sturgeon's "Never Underestimate . . ." is neatly made. Murray Leinster's "Plague" and James Blish's "The Box" are straightforward examples of competent science fiction, whilst John D. Macdonald reveals a frightening facet of future trends in "Spectator Sport." Watch out, though, for that short-short sketch "The Choice" by W. Hilton-Young which originally came from *Punch*.

William Dexter, the author of **World In Eclipse** (Peter Owen 10/6) has, according to the dust jacket, spent a lifetime reading science fiction. This I can well believe, as this, his first novel, lacks nothing in imaginative ideas all of which are very familiar. However, Mr. Dexter can write an interesting story, and I found myself furtively enjoying the latter half of the book in which his Vulcanids (appallingly similar to John Wyndham's *Triffids*) stalk the survivors of humanity in a deserted London. The plot has everything the stf. fan could shake a stick at, including flying saucers, alien overlord races from other planets and stars, the destruction of mankind by the overcleverness of our atomic scientists, longevity of life, rebirth of humanity by the captives of the Vulcanids (explaining the mysterious disappearances of the past century). For good measure there are some new astronomical phenomena Mr. Dexter has thought up, like an undiscovered planet in the asteroid belt, and an invisible planet which is our nearest neighbour. I admire the author's ingenuity and confidence in leaving the ending open for an intended sequel, but would suggest that he is wasting his talents on this sort of nonsense.

Among several interesting items from France, Georges H. Gallet, one of *International Fantasy Award* judges, has compiled a new anthology entitled **Escales Dans L'Infini** (le Rayon Fantastique; Hachette) in which is assembled as motley a variety of science-fiction from the archives as can be imagined, but which will no doubt be a successful introductory volume to many new French readers. Leading off with

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Weinbaum's famous "Martian Odyssey," we have "Pawley's Peepholes" by John Wyndham (from *Science Fantasy*), and early de Camp "The Blue Giraffe," C. L. Moore's weirdie "Shambleau," the ancient "Blind Man's Buff" by J. U. Giesy, Francis Flagg's "Machine Man of Ardathia" (memories of the old *Amazing Stories*), Gallun's "A Beast of the Void," Wellman's "Space Station No. 1" (from the old *Argosy*), A. Merritt's "Three Lines of Old French," and finally William Temple's early gem "The Smile of the Sphinx." Nostalgic, but attractive. Aimé Michel's **Lueurs Sur Les Soucoupes Volantes** (Collection Découvertes: Mame) is yet another treatise on flying saucers. The book is one of a series dealing with similar controversial semi-scientific topics, and purports to answer all the questions relating to the vexing problem of whether these alleged alien aeroforms are from another planet, and is profusely illustrated with genuine photographs of natural phenomena, stratosphere rocket flights, and also mock-ups of saucer incidents.

Finally we come to the paper-backed reprint market, which has taken on a more important aspect, with Arthur C. Clarke's **Prelude To Space** now available from Pan Books at 2/-, and Edmond Hamilton's **City At World's End** published by Corgi Books at 2/-. Both of these books have been reviewed previously in this column when the hard-cover editions appeared; both in their respective endeavours are excellent stories and in the current attractive editions are very worthwhile buys. Also from Pan Books comes Charles Eric Maine's **Spaceways** (2/-) which as been screened and broadcast, and is a realistic science-fiction mystery novel acceptable to most sections of the reading public. But I must disagree with the publisher's blurb which states that it was made into the *first* British science-fiction film. Even Wells' "Things To Come" was done nearly twenty years ago.

Leslie Flood

Continued Overleaf

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Juveniles

Christmas-time, birthdays and end-of-term prize-giving were always eagerly awaited events during my schooldays when there always seemed to be an abundance of fascinating books in colourful wrappers and glittering bindings. Often there was the treasure trove of Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling; a yearly 'classic' by Charles Dickens arrived regularly from a maiden aunt; sometimes a Verne or Wells book, but more often than not it would be Thackeray or James Barrie or Shakespeare. Even in those days I could have wished for more Verne and Wells.

Today the accent on juvenile books, both fiction and non-fiction, appears to be in the marvellous, the mechanical, and the future—in any case, to Youth belongs the future and if some of the following books help to widen the younger generation's outlook on our rapidly expanding horizons then both publisher and author have done a worthwhile job.

For instance, I cannot think of a more fascinating and beautifully produced book for boys (of all ages!) than Arthur Clarke's **The Young Traveller In Space** (Phoenix House, 7/6), if you have a problem of what to make as a gift. In simpler form, profusely illustrated with photographs and diagrams, it is a juvenile edition of his earlier adult books *Interplanetary Flight* and *The Exploration Of Space*, carrying the reader from the birth of the firework, through the principals of rocket propulsion to present-day experimentation and onward to the theory of spaceflight and a journey to the Moon. Then, with a little elementary astronomy on the side, Mr. Clarke surveys the widening vistas of Man's future in the light of the dawn of interplanetary travel.

Following the success of their outstanding *Adventure Of The World* (reviewed in No. 27), Rathbone Books have now published in slightly smaller format two similarly designed titles in their "World In Pictures" series. They are **Icebergs And Jungles** by Shirley Carpenter and Marie Neurath and **Mountains And Valleys** by the same two authors and Stewart Irwin (4/6 each). Lithographed pictures in beautifully toned colours together with easy-to-read text and cleverly designed shadow relief maps make both books educational 'musts' for children who are beginning to read well and to whom the mysteries of the world around us are cause for great wonderment.

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As an " annual " to take the place of all the lurid comic annuals that appear at this time of the year the **Authentic Book Of Space** (5/-) has just about everything to interest the 12-year-old and over. Articles by well-known authorities on space-flight, radio in space, astronomy and telescopes, space-suits, an artificial satellite and other items, science fiction stories by popular authors, a strip-story, a space game, photographs, illustrations and colour plates—and, of course, an Introduction by Arthur Clarke.

Two books well worth considering for the more serious-minded schoolboy are **Your Trip Into Space** by Lynn Poole (Lutterworth, 8/6), and **Thanks To Inventors** by our old friend Professor A. M. Low (Lutterworth, 12/6), the former only if the child has not already had one of the many juvenile non-fiction books recently published on the same lines. Lynn Poole's book is illustrated by Clifford Geary who usually illustrates the Heinlein science fiction juveniles for Scribner's, which leads me to assume that this is the British edition of an American book—and that may be the reason why I felt it was too old

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a book for the age group it slanted toward. Nevertheless, it adequately covers all the salient points concerning the conquest of space.

Professor Low's book is something entirely different and covers in an extremely light and interesting manner the facts and people involved in scores of inventions now so common-place in our everyday life and explains in simple, often humourous language, how such inventions work. Professor Low, himself an inventor of considerable repute and President of the Institute of Pantentees was President of the British Interplanetary Society in 1937 and is still an active Fellow.

Titles available in the fiction group are a peculiar mixture of sensible and non-sensible stories, depending entirely upon the adult viewpoint of what is suitable for the younger mind to read. I have always been of the opinion that the publishers of juvenile fiction slant their products down to low, assuming that the modern child is only interested in slam-bang action and cannot comprehend the more thoughtful type of story.

As a fine example of the thoughtful type of story which still contains everything demanded of an exciting boy's book there hasn't been a better book published this year, either in Britain or America, than Robert Heinlein's **Starman Jones** (Sidgwick & Jackson, 7/6). Not only is it the best of the Heinlein juvenile series (published in U.S.A. by Scribner), but it is one of his best books to date, and is very cleverly slanted in such a manner that it can just as easily be an adult book. This trick is managed by having the youthful central character, Maximillian, disguised to look in his early twenties so that he can obtain a Guild card and become a Junior crewman on a starship—a forged card at that. Thereafter, no further references are made to Max's age.

The youth's ambition is to become an Astrogator, but long before the starship *Asgarde* becomes lost when Time-jumping through space Max is learning shipboard life the hard way. That Max eventually gets an opportunity to become an astrogator and at the same time save the ship and all its passengers is merely the end product of as suspenseful a story anyone could wish to read. Mr. Heinlein, a former U.S. Navy Officer, pilots a taut ship through the tricky shoals of science and fiction and presents a book worthy of an International Fantasy Award, if there was a section for juveniles.

Of the rest of the current production, most of them fall into the "pirates in space" class which seasoned readers will call "space opera." Lutterworth Press have produced two titles by Hereward Ohlson, **Thunderbolt Of The Spaceways** and **Thunderbolt And**

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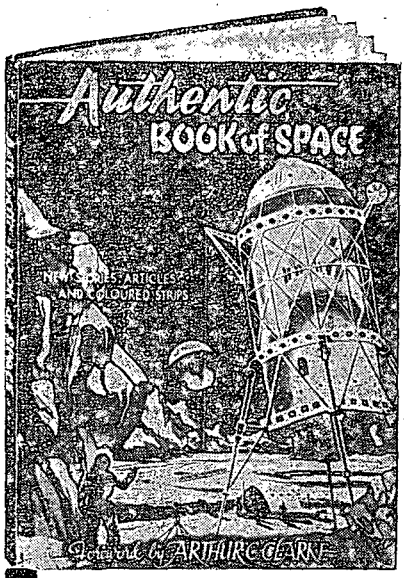

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The Rebel Planet (6/- each), dealing with a central character and gold pirates on the asteroids and peculiar beings from outer space. From the same publisher comes Mary Patchett's **Adam Troy, Astroman** (6/-), dealing with a young man saving the world from an extra-terrestrial calamity, while from Publicity Products comes a of books under the banner of "Tom Corbett Space Cadet" series at 3/6 each : **Stand By For Mars, Danger In Deep Space** and a title in their "Venture Library" **Rip Foster Rides The Grey Planet.** All of them are of comparatively poor quality as fiction but their low selling price is an asset if looking for an inexpensive gift.

John Carnell

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Dear John :

There is a question I would like to ask. It's about a quality I discover not only in the stories you run but in many other British stories and novels. Apparently it is an English style of writing, and it confuses me a little. It is this: an author sets up a problem or question in the opening of his story—he also indicates the likely solution. Then he slowly and carefully works toward the identical solution at the end. There is no surprise, no fillip, nothing unexpected. Sometimes an author prepares for a final conflict and resolution—having established the ingredients which will make for the final conflict (which the reader easily anticipates), he then constructs and executes that identical conflict.

Since I was raised and trained in the American School of the Unexpected, I find this technique tending to make for dullness at times—also disappointment. Although I'm the last man in the world to pay homage to the Monster of the Big Twist, I do become impatient occasionally with this meticulous working out of the obvious; and I feel cheated when the author has not taken the trouble to outsmart me.

I know this is not ineptness. It must be deliberate or, perhaps, traditional style, but I cannot quite make out the purpose. Have I missed the point somewhere?

Alfred Bester,
London, S.W.5.

(I feel quite certain that a lot of our readers will attempt to refute your statements, Alfred, but I am inclined to agree with your puzzlement. It is obvious to anyone who closely reads both British and American style

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literature that the former is more prosaic—we seem to work to the formula of one plot one story, whereas most American stories have a formula of one Major plot and numerous sub-plots, which makes for faster action and greater surprise in the ending. —Ed.)

Dear Mr. Carnell :

There is apparently now in progress a severe decline in the inventiveness of science-fiction writers, which coincides with an upward tendency in the writing style. Much the same thing happened in the popular song writing field. A very large proportion of the " new " songs consist of old tunes which have been ' mucked about with,' given new clever words and titles—the same applies to science fiction. At one time it was possible to rely on good authors staying within the bounds of logic—in fact, that used to be the great attraction of the science fiction story as opposed to fantasy. It now seems to be quite in order to do a ' Bradbury ' and throw logic to the winds to obtain a shock ending, or to finish a story half-way through a plot, leaving both the characters and the reader up in the air. It also makes things easier for the author—but that is perhaps an unkind thought.

Two types of story which are at the moment being flogged to death and which we could very well do without, having already read too many of them, are (*a*) the one in which the chief character turns out to be a robot, android, BEM, or evil spirit in the last couple of lines, after the author has done his best to kid the reader into thinking otherwise; and (*b*) the one which was originally written about Mexican Pete or China Jack or the Shooting of Dan McGrew, and has crept into a science fiction magazine because it has been translated a hundred years into the future and a few million miles to another planet, with no change in the plot and little in the characters or action.

I suppose editors have the increase of sales as their chief aim, and in order to attract new readers they tend to shy away from the real stuff because they think new readers cannot understand it—or maybe that it isn't worth understanding, anyway. The result is a feeble watered-down kind of science fiction which may be more literary than some of the old yarns but just hasn't got the guts.

Alan G. Dunn,
Hull, Yorkshire.

(I will admit that an editor's chief concern is to increase circulation, but it is closely inter-related with pleasing the majority of readers for most of the time. Literary standards have risen tremendously in recent years—I think the whole tenure of science fiction is altering because of that change, and the ' old days ' we both remember have gone for ever.

—Ed.

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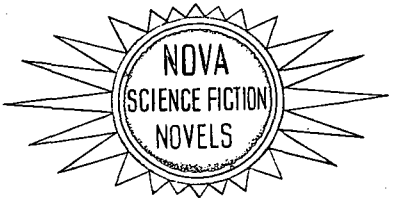

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